

# Agency Rules

NEVER AN EASY DAY AT THE OFFICE

**KHALID  
MUHAMMAD**

By day, Khalid Muhammad is a mild-mannered business executive keeping busy running a marketing and brand management company. By night, his alter ego emerges; one that has a penchant for sadistic retribution towards those who wrong others, and that spends its time devising intricate and detailed plans for a nefarious end.

Born in Pakistan's troubled Swat Valley, educated and raised in the United States, Khalid returned to Pakistan almost 17 years ago and fell in love with his country. His debut novel, *Agency Rules - Never an Easy Day at the Office*, is a journey behind the headlines about Pakistan, the world's most dangerous place, to deliver an intense story that will challenge the reader to question everything they have been told about the country.

He began writing to let the wickedness escape, as the other option means a great deal of blood, numerous torture implements and... well, infinite ways to dump a body. It's safer for everyone involved and less dangerous for the guilty... until he writes another book.

Agency Rules

Never an Easy Day at the Office

Khalid Muhammad

**Agency Rules: Never an Easy Day at the Office**  
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Keep Up With Agency Rules

What Readers Have Said...

# CHAPTER 1

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Nine months ago, the Muslim League government had won a surprising mandate across Pakistan on a manifesto that was full of promises that would be difficult, if not impossible to deliver. One of their core promises was returning Karachi, Pakistan's largest metropolis and economic hub, back to a peaceful existence.

Since his party's election victory, Prime Minister Azam Shah had struggled with difficult questions on the actual implementation of his manifesto that had gotten them elected, but had never seemed to provide any clear or direct answers. One thing he had clearly demonstrated was his intense love for the cameras and media spotlight during his political events. As the opposition leader in the previous government, he had taken great pleasure in highlighting the failings and bad decisions of the sitting government. Today, however, was a different story as his government was now in power and he was regularly in the hot seat. During a tour of a children's hospital in his native Multan, the Prime Minister was again posturing for the media. As the visit drew to a close, the newly minted Prime Minister sauntered to the podium as if he had won an award, unserious and jovial, until a staunch critic of the government posed a difficult question.

"Prime Minister, you have occupied the most powerful seat in the country for almost nine months now. Do you not see it as a failure that your government has not drafted any policy to address the violence in Karachi?"

It was not the first time it had been asked, but it was the first time the word 'failure' had been introduced into the public debate. As he looked around the gaggle of journalists each thrusting forward to capture his next words on their recorders, he knew this would be the lead headline for the rest of the day, opening the door for opposition and coalition parties to criticize his inaction.

He measured his response, almost rehearsing the words in his mind before speaking. "I think it's too early to use words like failure. When we were not the ruling party, our information was limited to what the previous government wanted us to know. Now, we have more intelligence about the situation, and I am briefed daily."

Journalists started firing follow-up questions at him before he could complete his response. He held up his hands to try to bring the situation back under control.

"Just a minute, may I finish my response before you start your follow-ups?" he asked, trying to assert his position, but even he knew he had less than thirty seconds to finish and get away before he was cornered by the wolves stalking their prey.

"The government has had several meetings with all the stakeholders, both collectively and individually, over the past few months to ascertain the best course of action," he continued hesitantly, knowing he had been repeating this for months now. He knew he

wouldn't win any favors by repeating himself. Just then, he felt a hand on his side and saw a note placed before him on the podium. Quickly scanning the note, he flashed a semi-smile. "Next week, we will bring everyone together to decide the final course of action."

He moved hastily from the podium to his waiting motorcade, effectively ending the press conference and avoiding any additional questions. As the motorcade pulled away from the hospital, the Prime Minister looked beaten to his party colleagues. He had not been ready to discuss the unformulated Karachi policy, which would definitely *not* be ready in a week.

It was going to be a difficult week for Prime Minister Shah and his spokespeople. Pandora's box had been opened.

Since the Prime Minister's briefing, the political parties had taken turns hurling barbs at each other in the media, leveraging the lack of decision-making from the Prime Minister's Secretariat. Rumors of operations and punitive action made their rounds on the evening talk shows, as the death toll rose in the city. The provincial government had pulled out all the stops to empower law enforcement agencies to take a heavy hand to criminals and terrorists, collectively known as miscreants. The miscreants in the city had become emboldened by the police's ineffectiveness, and the provincial government's unwillingness to call out the armed forces to return Karachi to a city of peace.

Inside the National Assembly's cabinet meeting room, a group of select representatives of the federal and provincial governments and the armed forces came together to find a solution. Around the table sat the political leadership of the province, heads of various law enforcement agencies, the intelligence services and armed forces, with the Federal Interior Minister chairing the meeting. The political leadership was divided between increasing the mandate of the law enforcement agencies and calling the army into the city.

The debate spanned hours, with each side arguing the benefits of their positions before the Interior Minister finally turned to General Ali, who, along with his colleagues, had thus far been a spectator at the meeting.

"General Ali," said the Federal Interior Minister, as the room descended into silence. "What if we call out the army?"

General Amjad Ali, the Chief of Army Staff, was the highest-ranking military officer in the country. Over his two-year tenure, he had gained international support for his extreme patience with the civilian government and was the person that every diplomat knew held all the power, no matter who sat in the Prime Minister's chair. Having sat in numerous meetings like this one, his patience with the civilian government's political posturing had worn thin, but his respect for the uniform he wore had kept him from bitch slapping all of them. Before the meeting, he had warned the Interior Minister not to put him in a position where he would have to undermine the political leadership in the province or the nation's capital. It irked him, therefore, that his advice had been ignored.



“Minister sahib, you know that the army is not the solution to this problem,” said the General, pulling a cigarette from the pack of Marlboros in front of him. The room sat anxiously awaiting the General’s next words.

He shook the box of matches, echoing in the large hall, before pulling a match and running it across the side. The smell of tobacco mixed with the sulfur in the air as he took a long drag. “The army is a broadsword that is used to cut down anything in their path. You don’t want us deployed in Karachi.”

“General, if the Prime Minister gives the order to send in the army...” said the Federal Interior Minister, but the General put his hand up to stop him before he completed the sentence.

“Why would the Prime Minister give such an order, Mr. Chaudhry?” The General leaned forward to put out the barely smoked cigarette. “Would *you* advise him to do such a foolish thing? Are you tired of being in government already?” A barely noticeable sneer crept across his battle-worn face.

The Muslim League’s eight months in government had seen them struggle with every decision on how to solve Pakistan’s problems. Ahsan Chaudhry, the Federal Interior Minister, was a Harvard graduate but inexperienced for the position that he held. He was, however, extremely close to Prime Minister Azam Shah and many felt that he would make the decision for the sitting government.

“General Ali, I don’t like your tone or implication,” retorted Chaudhry. “The Prime Minister takes recommendations from every stakeholder and then makes his decision.”

The General grimly looked at him, as a father would his child after catching them in a lie, and turned to speak with the Director General of the Inter Services Intelligence. After a few minutes of muted conversation between the two, General Ali leaned back in his chair to think for a moment. Pulling a second cigarette from the pack, he tapped it against the table.

“Minister sahib,” the General started, as the air filled with the smell of sulfur again. “There is no media here to record this and we will all assume that no one will speak with them about the internal conversations held here.” He shook the match to extinguish the flame and dropped it into the ashtray, now overflowing with half-smoked cigarettes. “You all understand that the army would be the most extreme response to the situation, correct? That calling the military into the streets of an urban center will lead to more problems than solutions?”

The General didn’t pause for an answer. “I tasked the intelligence services two months ago to develop a list of key individuals involved in the unrest in Karachi. They have provided me with a list of over 1000 people, including politicians, business people, bureaucrats and police, that are involved in the activities, support, financing and management of roughly five gangs.”

“I take great offense to the implication that my police officers or politicians would be involved in the unrest in Karachi, General,” sputtered Murad Khan, Chief Minister Sindh. “These are baseless allegations that have been made repeatedly by the media. We are not involved! Why have these lists not been shared with our government? Why were we not made aware that these activities were being carried out by the intelligence services?”

“CM sahib, you don’t wear a uniform, so these lists,” the General held up the file in the air, “are none of your business. This is routine activity for the intelligence services to identify those who are involved in anti-state activities. We are not formally calling them anti-state, but we do know these people now.”

“Your intelligence is faulty,” declared the Inspector General Police and Chief Minister in unison.

“These are just hit lists of people that the General wants to eliminate,” continued the Inspector General Police.

The General ignored the interruption. “These documents provide us with a complete list of those people involved, but be clear on a few things. You don’t want us in Karachi. We don’t make mistakes, no matter what those sitting around this table and in the media would like to think. We will hunt them down. We will find them in their hiding places. We will kill them. We ask that you not consider this option because we don’t want Pakistanis and Karachites looking over their shoulders wondering if the army is coming for them. No city can function in fear.”

The room buzzed with discontent at the General’s statement. The provincial and federal leadership clearly wanted the lists to be shared, and they began to voice their demands loudly and insistently.

It didn’t take long for the situation to escalate to counter-accusations that the ISI was behind it all to destabilize the new government.

Chief Minister Khan, letting his anger boil over, yelled at the General. “You just want the situation to get worse so that you can take the country over again! That is what the Pakistan Army does!”

At this sally, the Corps Commander Karachi leaned forward in his seat, flipped on the microphone before him and, without looking at the General, said, “And whose fault is that? We are sitting here today watching the largest urban center in Pakistan burn because the political leadership can’t stop blaming everyone else long enough to find a solution!”

Lieutenant General Bilal Siddiqui, Corps Commander Karachi, had spent months in meetings with this same group of provincial leaders discussing the same problem. He had seen the in-fighting between the various political stakeholders, the ineffectiveness of the law enforcement agencies and the lack of resolve from the courts to take any real action against those who committed these crimes, much less any action to take out the ones who masterminded the activities. In past meetings, he had held his tongue, but the behavior of

the Chief Minister was beyond what was acceptable. “I have repeatedly told you all that there are rogue forces in your parties and organizations that are benefiting from this unrest. Have you taken any action to remove these people? No! Now, you want to create a conspiracy theory that the military wants to allow this to continue?” The Lt. General was contemptuous. “No, sir. I will not allow that.”

Chaudhry waited to make sure that the General had completed his point, before asking, “Do you have any other options to resolve this problem? We have empowered the police and paramilitary but have not been able to shut down the gang warfare.”

“We have a number of options,” said the Lt. General. “We know who is involved and we know how to stop them. Since the political leadership, police and paramilitary forces have not been able to get this under control, we don’t feel a need to share this information with anyone at this table.”

A stunned silence fell across the room, shocked that the Lt. General was unwilling to disclose potential options for discussion among the civilian government. Chaudhry was the first to break the silence, hoping to stave off another round of heated accusations.

“General, you need to share the options with us otherwise we cannot decide a proper course of action.”

The Corps Commander looked towards his commanding officer, who remained maddeningly casual, before turning back to Chaudhry. “Frankly, Minister sahib, army command does not feel the need to open that discussion here.”

“You do understand that the Prime Minister and Chief Minister need to approve any action?” Chaudhry sensed that he had lost control of the situation. “How do you carry out what you are planning without their approval?”

The room fell into deafening silence as the Lt. General briefly conferred with the uniformed army personnel sitting around him. The political leadership strained to decipher the low murmur of the private conference, unsuccessfully. In a mockery of a synchronized event, the leadership sat back in their chairs just as the uniformed members turned back to the table.

General Ali sat forward, turned his microphone on again. “If we were to go to the Prime Minister for approval for all our actions inside the country, we would not have most of the intelligence that we have. You need to eliminate the thought from your mind that the Pakistan Army operates under the purview of the Prime Minister or any other member of government.”

The room erupted with objections and accusations that the military was operating as a state within a state, but General Ali chuckled at the accusations, simply stating, “Why should today be any different than any other day in Pakistan?”

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Five kilometers down the road from the National Assembly stood a nondescript building that housed Pakistan's premier spy agency. Anyone standing outside the gates would never know that this was where one of the world's most feared intelligence services was based.

Inside, in a cold, long room furnished only with a mahogany table, twenty men had gathered for a briefing that would change their military careers.

Colonel Akbar, a veteran of the Afghanistan resistance against the Soviets and a master of guerrilla warfare, stood before his team. Colonel Akbar had trained the mujahideen to fight the Soviets, who were better armed and better trained than the guerrillas but unable to fight a resistance force in the mountains and streets. He had been part of the ISI's counter-insurgency force for decades and an expert on guerrilla warfare for the agency.

"This operation has two very simple objectives," the Colonel explained to the group. "First, we want to cut off all their supply lines, revenue sources and organizational structure. Second, we want to inflict extreme pain on those who finance and support these activities in the city. We will have one group that will be responsible for intelligence gathering and target identification. A second group will implement the go orders. A third team will clean up the aftermath of the go order, and lastly, an administrative team will document and report information up the chain of command.

"Your presence and activities will be unknown to anyone outside of the people in this room, the Corps Commander, Director General ISI and the Chief of Army Staff." The Colonel paused to let the words sink in. "If you're not willing to follow these rules, stand up and leave the room now," he continued. Five soldiers hesitantly stood, glanced around the room for other supporters, but finding none, they started for the door. The Colonel called out to them.

"Take those uniforms off when you leave the room. They are worn by men and you ladies don't fall into that category." That single statement froze them in their tracks. Each turned to look at the Colonel, wondering if their military careers had just ended. "There is nothing here for you. I'll be speaking with your commanding officers before the day is over. Dismissed, ladies."

He waited for the door to close and returned to the group before him. "Anyone else? This is your only chance to walk away."

Each man shook his head, assenting to their participation, and the Colonel knew he had his wet team. "This army is charged with defending the country from both internal and external threats. This agency is primarily responsible for intelligence and covert actions outside our borders, but there are times when both must work together to restore order."

He picked up the glass on the table behind him. "We face an internal threat today that should have been controlled by civilian law enforcement agencies, but they have sold their

souls to the devil and the devil is collecting his due.” He motioned to the men to gather round the table. He pulled a thick plastic file forward, and flipped it open, pulling out a number of maps, papers and photographs.

Over the next three hours, the Colonel broke down the covert action, identified targets, methods and required end results. Having trained the Mujahideen, he had an intimate knowledge of maneuvering within an occupied city and how to extract information from hostiles. “All means at our disposal will be used to neutralize this problem permanently and serve as a warning to anyone who dares to do it again. Ajmal, Amjad and Basit, you are Alpha team. You will serve as the on-ground eyes and ears for the operation, coordinating intelligence with our existing network. Dawood, Aftab and Kamal, Omega team, you will implement. Kamran, Moin and Riaz, Charlie team, support the implementers. You do what they tell you to do,” the Colonel barked out. “The remaining six will be operational support. You keep track of the targets neutralized and report to me. Is everyone clear on their mission?”

They all spoke, as if someone had pulled a string on their backs, simultaneously. “Yes sir!”

“Men, this country turns to us when everyone else fails. The politicians and police have had their chance; they choose to stand with the gangs.” The Colonel relaxed his stance slightly, winding up the briefing. “We cannot fail. Karachi needs us.

“Omega team, I want to speak with you three privately. The rest of you are dismissed. Be ready to travel day after tomorrow.”

Kamal, Dawood and Aftab waited for their colleagues to click their heels and clear the room before spreading out around the table. Kamal’s military career so far had been spent on battlefields with live target practice, sitting in a sniper perch yards from the action. He was precise and detached from the action in many cases, but his burning passion made him an invaluable member to any team. Taking out hostiles, accurately, quickly, and providing essential cover to his brothers-in-arms was a matter of pride for him.

*This is different though*, he thought to himself. *There are no uniforms; these are civilians* The possibility of neutralizing an innocent troubled his mind for a split second before he snapped back to attention. The Colonel was speaking.

“Gentlemen, you have one of the most important responsibilities in this operation. As implementers, your job is not only to get the targets neutralized, but also to strike such fear into the hearts of these gang leaders that they beg to surrender. These people have been allowed to terrorize Pakistanis for too long now.” the Colonel continued. “There will be hostiles on this list that you may have moral issues neutralizing, but these files should help motivate you to do your jobs.”

The Colonel fanned open several photographs and placed them before the three.

Kamal recoiled instantly. Dawood gagged slightly, and Aftab turned away.

They were confronted with photographs of burned, tortured and beaten bodies, each tagged with the names and ages of the victims. Kamal's stomach churned as he scanned the images, and he could see Dawood and Aftab were struggling as well. *What the fuck? This is bloody nauseating.*

"These people were ordinary citizens targeted because they had successful businesses, supported law enforcement or just got in the way of a gang's expansion," Colonel Akbar told them. "Show them the same mercy they showed those in their hands. Ruthless is countered with ruthless. Our politicians, police and judges have shown that they are intimidated, or in league with them. We don't have fear. We create and exploit it."

Later, sitting in the canteen with his team members, Kamal found himself recalling the pictures in the file. Each of the pictures had been tagged with names and descriptions of the deceased, and he now had names to go with the faces of the victims. It smoothed away the split second of doubt he had experienced during the briefing, but his stomach continued to churn. Kamal knew that Dawood had actually parted with his breakfast right after the briefing.

Early next morning, the team gathered at Chaklala Air Base, scheduled to fly to Karachi on a C-130 with their required equipment. Not every military invasion requires hundreds of men and a convoy of military hardware; some are designed to move with deadly precision. This mission was silent and surgical, meant to disrupt all that the criminal mafias held sacred. Karachi would not be the same once they were done.

## CHAPTER 2

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From his perch on top of a seven-story apartment block, Kamal watched the people below move through their daily lives. There was a fruit seller in the far corner shouting to passersby, trying to draw attention to his wares. Just a few shops down was a lone waiter at a *chapli kebab* house trying to keep up with the demands of the numerous customers screaming their orders. Small tables crowded the wide pavement at a small *chai* hotel, partly obscured by the smoke billowing from the giant *tawwa* placed prominently outside. The faint sound of music, and the raucous yell of vendors and shopkeepers floated up in snatches to where Kamal was hidden. This was the life of the Pathans in Sohrab Goth located in the north of Karachi; it was the gateway for immigrants to the city. From here they would set their way and start their lives in Pakistan's largest metropolitan center.

Kamal shifted imperceptibly in his position, careful not to disturb the rifle hidden under foliage beside him. He had found a spot with the sun behind him, to minimize glare off the scope, and he had been out there for hours. *It's a lonely job*, Kamal thought to himself. Kamal had learned in the battlefield that his instincts were rarely wrong, but that was a battlefield. There it was clear who the enemy was, but in an urban center, enemies were never clearly marked. The decision to pull the trigger on a target was his own, and it meant Kamal had to pay closer attention to where a potential threat could come from and how it would manifest itself.

This was the tenth day of surveillance, and Kamal's body was stiff every evening when he descended to the flat they had rented in the building. The operational command, Major Imtiaz, wanted him close to the theatre so response to any untoward incidents could be covert, quick and decisive.

The flat was a small, dingy affair, barely 800 square feet of prime real estate in an overcrowded city. Residents kept to themselves, which was a huge advantage, but Kamal still preferred to remain in the shadows. The front door opened into a small living area and kitchenette. The room was dark when he entered—not unusual, as his colleagues were still watching the streets below through slits in the blinds.

Kamal made a small sound to attract their attention. Even though the neighboring flat was empty, they were habitually careful with their movements. In silence, Captains Dawood and Aftab joined Kamal at the counter and they exchanged notes on their potential targets, and possible persons of interest.

By the time they were done, Kamal was afraid his bones would creak if he moved too fast. But as soon as he was free, he moved towards the back bedroom. Quickly and efficiently, he stripped off his sweat-stained clothes and took a silent sponge bath in the tiny en suite bathroom. Barely fifteen minutes later, he lowered himself onto the bed, and

finally allowed his mind to wander.

Just eleven days ago (it already felt like a lifetime), he'd gotten into a jeep with six fellow army officers, driving away from the base where he was stationed. The base shrunk behind them as they drove down a secluded road towards a series of hangars far from any signs of life. It became clear that no one was supposed to know who came in on the flight as the C-130 was turned around and went racing past them into the air, back to Rawalpindi.

Pulling closer, Kamal noticed the dilapidated hangars with paint chipping from the exterior walls, and the light over the entrance broken. These hangars were purposely made to look this way. They were sequestered to a far off section of the air base so that they would seem inconspicuous and hide the actual purpose of their usage.

The doors of the hangar were thrown open as the jeeps pulled closer and were quickly ushered inside with the entry doors slammed behind. Inside stood a man in fatigues smoking a cigar, surrounded by a group of men, tables and bulletin boards. The only light in the entire hangar hung above the man, slightly swaying from the rush of air that entered behind the jeeps.

Major Imtiaz was a seasoned officer and the commander on the ground in Karachi. He had gained his guerrilla experience under the watchful eye of Colonel Akbar in Bajaur and Kashmir and was one of the top interrogators in the Pakistan Army. Credited with breaking Soviet soldiers and operatives during the Afghan conflict, Indian soldiers in Kashmir and many others that were only known from the intelligence gathered in foreign missions, he had been honored with the title Quizmaster.

He had delivered the team's final briefing, updating them on the situation along with the latest intelligence on their targets. His files had included the location of the dingy apartment where the Omega team was holed up.

A rough hand on his shoulder woke Kamal from his sleep, unclear and groggy.

"Kamal, get to the roof," hissed Dawood. "We have trucks moving. They're loaded."

"Where's Aftab?" Kamal asked scanning the room.

"He's next door on the radio. We need Major Imtiaz's authorization before we take any action," replied a tense Dawood. "Get moving!"

Kamal hesitated for a moment, then stepped to the wash basin to splash cold water on his face and over his head. Turning towards the door, he grabbed his .308 Lapua and started for the stairs. Climbing quickly, he slipped the comms device into his ear, flipping it on with his thumb. He gave his call-sign, "Omega 1. Check one, two, three. Check one, two, three. Command, do you copy?"

"Omega 1, this is Alpha 1. Hold for confirmation and authorization," came the easily recognizable voice of Ajmal. "Repeat, hold for confirmation and authorization."

Kamal reached the roof, set his weapon in place and settled into the perch he had



created. Adjusting his sight for wind and trajectory, Kamal brought the first truck of the convoy into the crosshairs, moved to the second and finally the third. Working without a spotter, Kamal understood that the possibility for error was strong but another person on the roof could potentially expose their location. He scanned the targets and environment looking for any hostiles that may be watching, holding his position as he waited for the go order in his ear.

“Omega 1, order confirmed. Authorization granted for lethal force,” came the voice in his ear. “Repeat, order confirmed. Authorization granted for lethal force. Confirm kill.”

In sniper training, one of the first things taught was the ability to ignore the environment and concentrate on the target. Phasing out the background allowed the sniper to hone in on what mattered to him, the target. Kamal’s mind went blank to his surrounding as he settled his body into a familiar drape across the floor. Scoping out the three trucks, Kamal weighed his options and made his decision. His finger twitched with anticipation against the trigger, as he slowed his heartbeat. Slowly adjusting his rifle sight, Kamal focused on the fuel tanks and pulled the trigger, releasing two rounds into the quiet of the night, leaving only a faint hiss as they propelled toward the target.

“Alpha 1, round away, impact in 5 seconds. 4, 3, 2, 1. Command, target 1 down,” Kamal quietly said into the comm unit, as the quiet night filled with the sound of the explosion in the first truck’s gas tank. He had seconds to neutralize the remaining trucks before they would bug out. Turning his sight towards the third truck, Kamal adjusted his sight as the trucks attempted to reverse away from the brightly burning lead truck. *Steady, steady*, Kamal thought to himself, as his finger hugged the trigger and pulled to propel the round toward its intended target.

“Alpha 1, round away, impact in 8 seconds. Command target 3 down,” Kamal reported. “Target two attempting to bug out but trapped between initial targets.”

“Omega 1, confirm third hostile,” came another voice in his ear. “Confirm third hostile down.”

He watched the middle truck of the convoy rocking back and forth, trying to find any escape route from the assault. From the corner of his sight, Kamal saw the men jumping from escort vehicles; weapons raised, looking for the direction of the assault. Like idiots, they moved closer to the last remaining truck, thinking that they were going to be able to save it. Kamal waited. *Come on...closer...closer...don't be afraid. Today you die.* With a sneer on his face and a snap, he let loose the final round, hurtling towards the last truck. Kamal pulled away from the rifle sight to watch as the round split the air, leaving a slight tracer behind it. He had always admired the accuracy of his work.

“Alpha 1, round away. Hostiles in range. Command target two down. Confirmed ten hostiles neutralized.” Kamal spoke emotionlessly into the comms unit. He heard several smaller explosions from below as the munitions within the trucks detonated. Flames rose

up in the air in concert with short bursts of explosions from all three trucks. It had taken six shots to take out the targets. *Like a boxer*, Kamal thought to himself, *three punches and down for the count*.

“Alpha 1, Omega 1 bugging out,” Kamal said to the voice on the other side. “Targets neutralized. Bonus ten hostiles neutralized. Munitions destroyed. It will be a safer morning in Karachi today.”

“Omega 1, well done. Return to watcher positions,” said the voice.

On the battlefield, Kamal was a legend with his Winchester and Lapua, affectionately known as his ladies. He had always taken great satisfaction in the kills that he had registered with a sickening frequency. This kill was different. It was his first urban takedown and it produced a rush of adrenaline that he could not explain. As he slowly descended the stairs to the flat, he could hear the sirens outside. He knew that every resident in the complex was now awake and watching the show, wondering if terrorists had struck again.

Miles away in the Garden district, a ringing phone interrupted the screams of pain coming from a makeshift torture chamber. Inside the chamber, a young police officer who had recently been transferred to Karachi’s gang violence unit from Lahore was tied to a rickety chair and bleeding profusely. His crime was simple. He had slighted Minto in his own territory. For Minto, there was no such thing as a slight too small and this copper had dared to ask for a bribe from one of Minto’s top lieutenants and revenue generators. Hanif, a graduate of Minto’s academy of mayhem, was masterful in his ability to cause panic with small explosives. When he wasn’t creating mayhem, he ran one of the most efficient drug distribution networks in the city, able to move product to any location in any quantity and on a moment’s notice. His successes were impressive and had earned him his place within Minto’s inner circle.

Minto pulled the knife out of the police officer’s leg, wiping the blade clean on the copper’s hair, and called for someone to bring him the phone. Minto’s place as the top Don in the city had been earned by killing all those who came before him and anyone who dared to challenge him. He was ruthless in his dispensation of justice to those who crossed him and feared by crime lords and top cops in the city alike. He was Minto sahib to them all; no one dared to call him by any other name.

By the time the phone reached Minto’s bloody hand, the ringing had stopped. Minto glared at his victim, who made a desperate attempt to stop his groans of pain, and in the ensuing silence, the phone started to ring again. A blood-covered hand picked up the receiver.

“What?” Minto barked into the phone.

“Minto gee...we have...lost the trucks,” came the wavering voice of Absar. Delivering bad news to Minto was a dangerous gamble. Messengers invariably suffered a gruesome

fate at his hands. “We were hit. The...the weapons are destroyed. Ten of our boys are dead and I have no idea where the shots were fired from.”

Minto froze. *Lost the trucks? How is that possible?*

“Motherfucker, what happened?” Minto yelled into the phone. *Which son of a bitch would dare target one of my transports?*

Absar’s scrambling and somewhat incoherent explanation raised Minto’s anger by several notches, but he got the gist of it. *Which fucking crime boss is making his move?* Minto wanted answers and wanted them now.

“Who the fuck would go after our transport? Don’t they know that their lives would belong to me?” Minto screamed at Absar. His ruddy face turned red which, added to his dark complexion, turned it a deep maroon color. It terrified the man in chair who had already pissed himself once that night. He pissed again at the rage in Minto’s voice. “Bring me the Pathans who were supposed to supply these weapons!”

A simple reply came from the other side, drowned out by the sound of sirens, “I’ll get it done, Minto *gee*.”

Minto slammed down the receiver, then took the phone and bashed it against his prisoner’s head, beating him unconscious only to revive him again for another beating. The police officer was running on empty and Minto was doing everything possible to bring his life to a painful end. With the expertise of a butcher, Minto picked up his knife and weaved a trail into his skin, peeling away portions of flesh. When the screaming became overwhelmingly loud, Minto stuffed the dirty rag he had been using to wipe his hands into the policeman’s mouth.

Looking down at the collapsed man, Minto grabbed a bowl of water. “How much would you pay me to end your life right now?” He threw the full bowl of water on his face, watching pink rivulets stream off the man onto the filthy floor.

The police officer awoke screaming in pain. His only thought was, *please God, when will this end?*

With one quick swipe of his seven inch Ka-Bar knife, Minto severed his victim’s carotid artery, answering his prayers. He signaled to the men standing in a darkened corner of the room.

“Dispose of this,” he said, pointing to the body. He grabbed his phone and snapped a picture for his collection. “Make sure to leave it somewhere for the public to enjoy,” he said as he left the small chamber. He lumbered into a room a few steps away — his ‘office’ — and threw himself onto a *charpai* to get some sleep. Torture was exhausting.

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Kamal had not slept comfortably the night before. Sohrab Goth was abuzz with

activity as fire trucks came in and out of the area throughout the night. During breakfast before daybreak, Aftab gave both Kamal and Dawood a briefing into the activities observed during his watch. At some point during the night, the police had cordoned off the area, restricting access to official personnel and vehicles only. A few military convoys had come into the area, including the Corps Commander and Military Intelligence, to survey the situation and offer their assistance, but this was a police matter and the army wanted nothing to do with it.

As the sun peaked over the horizon, Kamal was back in his position on the perch, rifle positioned and watching the area below. The charred remains of the three trucks were starkly black along the narrow street. People stilled milled around and the makeshift restaurants and hotels were packed as curiosity drove people to find out what they could about last night's events. They kept their distance from the crime scene, but only because of the cordon. Kamal knew that if that hadn't been there, the public would have been picking up souvenirs from the rubble. *One thing about this city, it's resilient.*

Today was hotter than ever and lying under the sun unable to move, Kamal felt the sweat sticking to his chest. *I'm going to have to dissolve this shirt with a solvent to get it off.* There were times that he envied the roles of Dawood and Aftab, sitting inside the flat with a fan running above them, taking some of the sting out of the heat. *How the fuck did I end up with this shit assignment?* With a sigh, he picked up his binoculars. *Time for some good old peeking.*

Aftab was out in the market below. Dressed in a blue *shalwar kameez*, he blended into the scene, but Kamal picked him up easily. Aftab stopped at the fruit seller Kamal had watched the day before, picking up some seasonal fruit. *Get the apples*, Kamal tried to telepathically send a message to Aftab. *Damn, not the falsas.* Kamal shook his head in disgust; he hated the tart, tiny purple fruit. He thought about using his rifle to blow a hole into the bag of *falsas*, but that would give away his position. He thought about calling Aftab, but stopped when he saw Aftab moving towards the weapons warehouse. Kamal dropped the binoculars and moved into position behind his rifle, quickly adjusting for range and trajectory. *What the hell is he doing? This wasn't discussed this morning.* He watched.

Aftab slowly made his way closer to the building and struck up a conversation with the men standing outside. Aftab was from Charsadda, on the outskirts of Peshawar, and fluent in Pashto, making blending in easier. He stood for what seemed like an eternity talking to them, and then reached into his pocket to pull out a cell phone. With a wave, he moved away from the men, talking on the phone as he slowly walked back to the apartment building.

Kamal continued to track Aftab, doing his best to read Aftab's lips. He felt a prickle of nerves along his skin. He could make out the words 'gangs' and an emphatic 'what' from Aftab, and Kamal realized that something had happened elsewhere in the sprawling city. *Had the gangs retaliated for the warehouse strike already?* Almost instantly, he felt the vibration of

his phone and Kamal instinctively reached up and activated the Bluetooth device in his ear. The voice said one phrase before going dark again. “Activate secure comms.”

## CHAPTER 3

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He hadn't had a chance to visit the tourist spots at Seaview or enjoy a hut at Sandspit, nor had he had the chance to visit a shopping mall or eat food at Barbecue Tonight — something he had really been looking forward to. No, Kamal was like a bird sitting atop buildings, taking in sights that no one wanted to admit existed in the city of lights. His six months had been spent prostrate, binoculars pressed to his eyes, watching targets in Sohrab Goth, Malir, Lyari and Orangi Town. He had grown accustomed to the sun beating down on him, baking him to a crisp. Karachi, unlike the scenic mountainous area he grew up in, was humid and hot, reaching desert temperatures at times. In the areas he'd visited, pollution and population had even blocked out the sea breeze the city was famous for. He was sure that his color had gotten two shades darker, matching the shift in his personality, as he watched the gruesome gang war escalate.

In six months, the team had neutralized over two hundred criminals involved in gang-related violence, snatched another hundred that had been interrogated for valuable information. These detainees had not been handed over to civilian courts, which were paralyzed by the fear of reprisals; they were in the safe hands of the military tribuna located within a secret prison guarded by fellow SSG commandos. History had taught the army that jails and prisons were not secure, but a prison that no one knew existed facilitated the army in intelligence gathering and swift justice.

Sadly, with any escalation of violence, there were innocent casualties from Karachi as well, as law enforcement, paramilitary and citizens became the targets in the fight to control the city. *This was war*, Kamal thought to himself as he sat reading the latest briefing in another cramped, rented apartment, *and war has never been for the faint of heart*. The only plus point of the escalation was that the remaining gang bosses were settling scores in a hope to fill the void left by the neutralized, effectively reducing Kamal and his team's workload.

The interrogations had yielded results and volumes of intelligence were passed to the analysts sitting within the ISI command center in Karachi for verification and target selection. It had been through these renditions that many of the top gang bosses and their hideouts had been identified for surveillance, where Kamal and his team would move into action again. But today was different. Kamal had been tapped by the command to actively participate in an interrogation.

Six months ago, Kamal would have never been able to use the force and intimidation required to get information from a detainee, and had proven it in his first entry to the Chamber. He was so gentle and controlled that the detainee openly mocked him, comparing him to a child asking for ice cream. He had experienced psychological torture

during his SSG training where he was taught the difference between tone and force.

“Tone is used to create fear within a subject,” his instructor taught. “Force is the realization of that fear.” A good interrogator used tone with the threat of force to gather intelligence. While effective, with tougher targets this method was questionable because the subject could pepper lies into the story. A great interrogator used force to connect a verbal demand with the real pain of non-compliance, a single trait that differentiated field interrogators gathering information from the quizmasters that were relied upon to deliver results. In simple terms, the difference between boys and men.

Today, Kamal stood on the other side of the glass as an observer while Dawood questioned Absar. But as the interview progressed, Kamal realized that Dawood wasn’t getting anything of value from Absar.

“Look, we know that you’re Minto’s number two. There is very little that we don’t know about you,” Dawood calmly said. “The best option for you is to be cooperative and you might see the light of day again.”

“Fuck you, motherfucker,” fired Absar. “You can’t break me. You know why? You’re a bitch! That’s all you are.”

Dawood, visibly angered and aware that Kamal was watching, slammed his hand down on the table and grabbed Absar’s throat, squeezing until his face turned a bright shade of red.

“You think I won’t shove a hot piece of rebar up your ass to get what I want?” Dawood was menacingly quiet. “I’ll rip you the fuck open, reach inside you and pull out the information I want.”

Absar chuckled as he got his breath back. Looking deep into Dawood’s eyes, he smiled viciously and beat his chest with his free hand. “Fuck you! You bitch. A gnat is scarier than you.” Absar growled back. “I can see in your eyes that you’ve never killed anyone. You don’t know the taste of blood.”

Kamal shook his head at the exchange, wondering how Dawood had been selected to be an interrogator. Skimming the files in his hand, Kamal thought about the devastation that these criminals had caused. They survived on maximizing terror and it was likely that any attack on them would yield a far greater retaliation with a significant body count. They had the one person that knew all of Minto’s movements, and he was toying with Dawood like a cat playing with a ball of yarn, slapping every attempt at information away with an insult and a laugh.

Commando training taught Kamal that the element of surprise throws everyone from their game. In the past, he had been restricted by military rules of engagement, but these were not members of any military — they were criminals and criminals don’t have rules of engagement. He motioned to the soldier standing guard outside the Chamber, instructing him on a change in tactics and direction that the interrogation would now take. As the

soldier moved down the hall to gather the required items, Kamal moved back to the window to continue watching the show.

Moments later, gunfire broke out in the hallway. First, shots from a handgun, followed by intermittent automatic weapon fire. Inside the Chamber, Dawood stopped and instinctively reached for his handgun, forgetting that security protocols didn't allow weapons inside the Chamber. As the gunfire intensified, Dawood, now visibly concerned, jolted the door, trying to open it, unsuccessfully. He pounded on the door, yelling to be let out, to unlock the door, but no response came from the other side. Absar cheered up, visibly.

"We are going to fuck you, soldier boy! My men are coming for me and I'll taste your blood for a change." Absar, entertained by the turn in events, jeered at Dawood. "You're a bitch and I'll show you what happens to bitches!"

Dawood pressed the intercom, looking for someone to explain the situation outside the Chamber, but only gunfire and static returned from the other side.

"Is there anyone there?" screamed Dawood.

Kamal stood listening to his colleague's yells, unconcerned and silent, even when the gunfire rushed closer and closer.

Dawood heard voices outside the Chamber as someone shouted instructions to rig the door with explosives. *There's nowhere to take cover from an explosion*, Dawood thought frantically as he scanned the room, hastily moving to the wall farthest away from the door. Within seconds, an explosion ripped the door from its hinges, blowing it inwards and narrowly missing both Absar and Dawood. Through the dust and shrapnel billowing in the air, two hooded men, covered in blood, entered. One man moved to grab Dawood, but Dawood got the jump on him and crashed him to the ground with a chair to his head, shattering the chair. Before Dawood could recover, the other man had him in a chokehold and was squeezing the life from his body, with Absar screaming his approval from his chained position.

"Kill the fucker!" shouted Absar, as Dawood went limp. "Well done! Minto will be proud of your fight!" The man tossed Dawood's unconscious body to the ground.

Absar's face went from hope for his impending freedom to horror as the hooded man turned towards him and, with a hard slap, drew blood from Absar's gaping mouth.

"You fucking traitor!" the man growled at Absar. "You have dishonored Minto."

"Wait. No. I haven't told them anything," pleaded a confused Absar. This wasn't the rescue he had been hoping for. He struggled against his chains, knowing that Minto's retaliation would not only mean his gruesome death, but the murder of all his family members. Minto was known for his sadistic rage. Fear tripped up his tongue. "Wait...they don't know anything..."

"Shut up, traitor," the man shouted, taking out his aggression with another backhand



and a kidney punch for good measure. “Sir, we have him!”

In the doorway appeared another hooded man, much larger than the other two. He too was covered in blood, with a bloody machete in one hand and petrol can in the other. Wiping the machete on his chest, the man entered the room, spilling petrol at the doorway and drawing a trail to Absar.

“Tell us what you told them, Absar.” The hooded man casually poured petrol around Absar’s chair.

“I didn’t tell them anything! I would never give them Minto!” The smell of petrol permeated Absar’s nostrils — he couldn’t place the man’s voice, which put him at a disadvantage. He knew that these would be his last minutes if he could not convince this man that he had not turned on his master.

The hooded man lifted the petrol can and emptied it over Absar. “Do you think that we don’t know what you’ve done?” The man’s husky voice was soft and calm, a chilling counterpoint to the butt of the bloody machete that slammed into Absar’s stomach. Absar doubled over in pain, his mind ticking in overdrive. *This doesn’t sound like Minto’s man — he sounds too...too educated.* “Tell us now or we’ll take your head back to Minto for his trophy wall.”

Minto’s trophy wall was unknown to anyone outside the circle. It was adorned with photographs of his victims and stuffed human appendages snatched from those that had wronged him. *How did they know about the trophy wall?* Doubt began to muddle Absar’s mind.

“We have already added your wife and parents to the trophy wall for your dishonor. If you chose not to cooperate, Minto will add your children alongside your head,” the hooded man’s husky voice continued, still in that eerily calm tone. Absar looked up in time to see the fist slamming into his face. “Your lovely, young daughter — how old is she now? Sixteen?” The man’s face was close to Absar’s and he was almost whispering the words into Absar’s ear.

Absar’s mind began to cloud with the images of his dead wife and parents, and he shivered at the thought of what they would do to his children. He began to doubt his own memories, wondering if something had slipped out during the many interrogations he had endured. *Had my random taunts given them clues?* Absar’s body jumped as a needle was pushed into his neck, and a blinding rush of heroin flooded his blood stream. *These were Minto’s men,* was his last coherent thought as the drug took hold, pushing him into a make-believe reality.

The hooded man’s machete blade cut into Absar’s throat, only enough to draw blood, but demonstrated the absolute resolve that these men brought from Minto. The information would be extracted and Absar’s children would either be saved or all would perish. Absar’s mind raced as he thought of his daughters, whose lives would be at his mercy. *Their beauty and innocence would be gone,* he thought to himself, knowing that Minto

would push them into prostitution to pay for the disloyalty of their father. There was only one way to save them; sacrifice himself.

“I told them everything,” Absar wept as he recounted the details of each hiding place and Minto’s security protocols. The only thing that he could think of was the safety of his children, as the heroin rushed through his bloodstream and polluted his brain. He stumbled in and out of consciousness as the figures moved around the room, not giving him a fixed position to concentrate on. The questions came fast and furious, further muddling Absar’s mind, but more information bubbled forward, mixed with his tears and blood.

The men, satisfied that they had gotten all the information they could from him, moved to the doorway. Absar’s eyes followed them as best he could.

“My children? Will they be safe?” Absar asked from the cloud of the drug. “Will Minto spare my children?” he screamed at the figure in the doorway. He had a vague impression that he was suddenly alone in the room with his tormentor.

With a pause, Kamal pulled the hood from his head and put a cigar in his mouth. “Minto never had your family,” he calmly said, pulling a matchbox from his pocket. He shook it to focus Absar’s mind on the next few seconds. He struck a match, letting the air fill with the smell of sulfur, before lighting his cigar, “but we will.”

Kamal took a deep drag and savored the flavor for a moment. Dropping the lit cigar into the puddle of petrol, he headed towards the hallway that led out of the Chamber. His work here was complete.

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Minto was taken quietly and in the dead of night just a few hours after Absar was burned to a crisp in an abandoned building in an industrial area of the city. Neither Minto nor his men were ever heard of again, nor did they ever see the inside of a court of justice.

Meanwhile, Kamal’s performance in Karachi had set him firmly on a road he coveted headed straight to the Jungle.

## CHAPTER 4

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It was two in the morning when he placed the call. He hadn't taken into account the time difference between Pakistan and Virginia, meaning that the call would ring unanswered in an empty office. Northwright's undercover asset had let his impatience get the better of him and the value of the information that he held would lose significance if not passed immediately. His call would have given Northwright an operational advantage because the rest of the organization would not know for days, as it worked through official channels in Pakistan. *This call had to get through*, he thought to himself.

Realizing his mistake, the operative dropped the call and quickly searched his clunky mobile for Northwright's private cell number and hit send. A groggy, sleep-deprived Northwright stirred in his mistress's bed as the phone rang on the table beside him. Unwillingly, he rolled away from the twenty-five-year-old plaything in his arms, trying to find his phone in the dark before his mistress woke. Late night calls were normally routed through the control center and they all knew not to call him here, *especially* here. Married for almost thirty years, this was his only escape from the covert world that he spent his life in. More importantly, Nicole, his mistress, knew nothing of what he actually did for a living. To her, he was a businessman with a bad marriage; all she really cared about were the expensive gifts and being pampered in exchange for her body.

David Northwright was a seasoned intelligence operative trained in the South American killing fields. From his days fifteen years ago as a lowly field operative to his final posting as Station Chief in Bogota, he had established a vicious history of kidnapping and torture. He had a special position on every wet team the Company assembled simply because of his bloodlust and skill.

Now, as a retired operative, he worked for the highest bidder doing whatever he was asked to do. The loyalty and brotherhood taught at the Company was leveraged to bring his 'favorites' to the dark world he now ruled.

As Northwright rubbed the sleep from his eyes and read the number, he realized that the perceived change in protocol was much more significant.

"Hold for encrypted communication," in a barely-comprehensible voice, Northwright gruffly spoke into the phone.

"Sir, we have a problem," blurted the caller immediately. "Minto is missing and Absar is dead."

Northwright hung up. The encryption had not yet activated. *Fucking idiot. Don't they teach these guys anything?* As a known player in geopolitical espionage, Northwright could be sure that a number of intelligence ears had heard the information, but there was a sliver possibility that no one would connect the significance to him. *Can't risk any communication*

*breaches*, he thought to himself. He shut off his cell phone and with a practiced flip of the wrist, he opened it up and removed the SIM. Reaching down to pull a Zippo from his pants pocket, he got out of the bed, his mind on the seven words he had heard before he had disconnected the call. His mistress stirred in the bed, realizing he was not beside her.

“Why are you up?” she muttered half asleep, reaching for Northwright’s shadow.

“Sorry darling, had a nightmare,” Northwright quickly answered, hoping that she would fall back into a deep sleep. “Kind of unsettling. Go back to sleep, I’m going to pop out on the balcony for a smoke.”

Nicole, now more aware, slid over and wrapped her arms around his waist, strategically placing her hands. “Let me help you relax. We can have a smoke together...after.”

Northwright fingered the SIM between his fingers, contemplating whether being insistent on a cigarette would raise additional questions, or worse, bring his plaything completely out of her slumber wanting to discuss the nightmare. Northwright knew that with the SIM in his hand, all tracking mechanisms were defeated, as were the NSA’s ability to use his phone as a listening device. He could destroy the SIM later, he thought as he slid back into bed, and Nicole did what earned her the expensive gifts.

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The sheer size of the ISI Academy campus intimidated Kamal. The Jungle, as it was known among the rank and file, sprawled over 5,000 acres of land situated in a location that no one would ever find without a map and a guide. As he was driven down the tree-lined road to the large granite building in the center, Kamal couldn’t help but compare this to his training bases at The Bird’s Nest and Attock Fort. The granite building stood alone amidst a beautifully manicured lawn with flags of the various branches of the armed forces flying above. The rest of the grounds were populated with forest, endless and vast which would most likely be used as a training ground. Exiting the vehicle, Kamal was ushered into the building by a soldier in full military dress, while another took his luggage from the car. In the foyer, he was given a file with his room assignment, rules, agenda for the day and a course list. The soldier directed him towards a door guarded by two more men in full dress uniform.

He entered a large hall where, he guessed, noticing the long benches and tables lining the sides of the room, they would serve lunch. The hall was massive, a double level affair with galleries along the second floor that overlooked the room. And it was crowded. Kamal stopped in his tracks, momentarily overwhelmed by the sheer size and magnitude of the space. He focused his attention on the men closest to him, trying to find familiar faces among the crowd. He knew of several SSG batch mates and seniors who had been accepted into the Jungle.

No one looked over. Kamal moved forward through the buzzing room, scoping it out. He easily identified testosterone-filled infantry soldiers from the raucous laughter and loud jokes. In contrast, air force and navy representatives were quiet and refined, speaking in low murmurs in small groups.

“Oye, *baanchod*! What the hell are you doing here?”

That voice...Kamal turned towards Major Iftikhar Siddiqui, a former instructor at The Bird's Nest during his SSG training, psyched to see a friendly face. The Major was a solid figure, built like a compact truck with a booming voice. His friendly greeting had several heads turning towards him, but the Major was impervious to the affronted stares. He gestured to Kamal to join them.

“Welcome to the Jungle!” the Major grabbed Kamal's hand and pulled him forward to introduce him to his group. “Gentlemen, this is Captain Kamal Khan, a former student of mine.”

“Sir.” Kamal nodded formally to the group, most of whom were a blur of names and uniforms. *This is a bloody convention on good posture*, he thought as he took in the ramrod straight stance of everyone around him. He turned back to the Major. “Will you be our counter-terrorism instructor here as well?”

“I'll join you for the advanced courses, but SSG soldiers are exempt from basic training,” the Major said with a wicked smile. “I get the boys first.” He cocked his head towards a small group huddled together in a corner of the giant room. “My job is to turn them into men.”

Kamal hadn't noticed the small group — they seemed to be shrinking into their skins, intimidated and quiet. “The boys?”

“Civilians.” Coming from the Major, it sounded like a dirty word.

Kamal's brows went up in surprise. “Civilians? I thought...”

“We have a civilian division, Kamal. I thought you knew that.” The Major was amused. “They're political appointees, or federal service commission candidates.”

“Basic training with these guys is a load of fun.” One of the Major's friends, a slim-built man sporting a fantastic handlebar mustache, was blatantly staring at the ‘boys’. “They're untested, undisciplined and unprepared, lacking the essential skills that every soldier here has.”

“And unfit.” The group's contempt for the civilian population in the room was obvious.

“Our only saving grace is that they'll never get to field or covert service.”

Kamal felt bad for the boys, but he was surprised that the ISI accepted political appointees. “Where are they normally posted?”

“Analysis. They're given access to the most inconsequential data to limit the opportunities to share intelligence for financial gain.”

“There are two things to remember about civilians in the ISI.” Ziad, the handlebar mustache guy, took the opportunity to teach the newbie a few things. “First, political appointees are likely to be snitches for the party in power. They work for them, for individuals, not the country. Second, they’re also far more likely to be turned or exposed if allowed into the field. We’ve seen this happen with the CIA, FSB and MI6 for years now.”

“Our legacy, though, is in this room.” The Major nodded to the plaques on the wall celebrating successful ISI operations, each with a date and detail but no operative names. On the wall to his right were photographs of past Directors General of the ISI since its inception in 1948 by General Robert Cawthorne, an Australian born British Army Major General who later joined the Pakistan Army. The whole room reflected the glorious history of the intelligence services. “We pander to civilian sensibilities by allowing them to feel like a part of us. It hasn’t slowed us down yet.”

“Attention!” The soldiers outside the door had entered, and the room snapped to attention at the command. Almost all of them, that is; the civilians, unused to reacting to orders, stood shifting their weight from side to side, as if standing in a school assembly. One of the soldiers noticed the disrespect of the order and surged towards the two who were most unsteady. Kamal watched, remembering his first days in basic training. *Oh shit*, he thought. *Those guys are about to get their first drill.*

“Stand up straight! Do you think that this is your mother’s living room?” spat the soldier in his face. “You know you don’t belong here! Tell us whose influence you used to get into this Academy. *Stand fucking still, maggots!*” The poor man leaned back, desperately trying to avoid the soldier’s spittle as he got yelled at. But he stood up straight, looking at the uniformed soldiers’ stances and mimicking them to the best of his ability. It wasn’t good enough for his assailant, however, who took his time yelling out the finer points of standing to attention.

“We will break you! We will turn you into men from the boys you are now.”

A second instructor, and then a third stepped forward to straighten out the civilian population of the room. The military candidates stood watching, making no attempt to hide their contempt. The volume increased exponentially as the instructors took each individual’s weaknesses and beat them over the head with them.

The civvies did their best to follow the orders, perhaps for the first time in their over-privileged, coddled lives, eventually falling into some semblance of order and discipline. A hush fell over the room as the soldier at the door straightened his rifle and yelled “Attention!” a second time.

A wave passed through the room as the uniformed soldiers snapped to salutes, heads stiffly facing forward. The Chief of Army Staff and Director General ISI were standing in the doorway. Files for every military candidate in the Academy passed across the desks of these two men during the selection process. The civilians had an easier path with a

commission of bureaucrats and military officers, but for those wearing a uniform, these men held the keys to their graduation and future postings as covert operatives.

Kamal had many interactions, granted from a distance, with both these men. Both had attended the SSG graduation and personally congratulated the graduates. He had medals pinned on his chest by the COAS when he returned from Fort Benning's International Sniper School for his performance and for winning the competition at the end of the course. This would be the first time that he would have more regular interaction and assessment from either man.

Behind the two military officers were members of the federal commission that had been responsible for selecting the civilians to the Academy. As the military officers moved to congratulate and interact with the uniformed personnel, the bureaucrats did the same with the civilians. This was a purely ceremonial practice done at the beginning of each Academy session.

The Generals reached the end of the room and took their respective places behind the podium that had been set up. The Director of the Academy, Brigadier Asif Nazar, was the first to step forward and welcome the candidates to the academy. An accomplished officer with a Sandhurst background like Kamal, the Brigadier didn't seem as daunting as his title, standing just short of six feet with a bit of weight around him. *Looks like the good General has been missing physical training*, Kamal thought to himself.

His address was short, covering his expectations of each candidate at the Academy and what the Academy offered to those who were able to successfully complete training. The Brigadier ended with an introduction to Lieutenant General Misbah Qadir, Director General of the Inter-Services Intelligence. He stepped down from the podium as his boss got up to speak.

The Lieutenant General was a striking contradiction to the Brigadier. He had not attended foreign military schools. He was a true son of the Pakistani soil. A graduate of the Pakistan Military Academy at Kakul, the Staff College in Quetta and this same ISI Academy, Lt. General Qadir had years of experience in Military Intelligence. He was a natural choice to head the ISI.

"If you are here thinking that this Academy will turn you into James Bond or a super spy that people will write stories about, you need to exercise your ability to walk out that door right now. This is not the place for you if that is your dream." Lt. General Qadir had an imposing voice, deep and raspy. "Pakistani intelligence has always been the most respected intelligence service in the world because of the standards that we instill and uphold in our operatives. We have spent decades earning our position in the espionage community and no one in this room will be allowed to erode it. This service stands as one unit, one force, not individuals. If you decide at any point that you are bigger than the service, you will find yourself outside the service as a target instead of an asset."

“This is the beginning, but how it ends, only those who graduate know,” he continued. “We will teach you what it means to be a warrior in the true sense of the word, following a code that embodies integrity, loyalty, honor, selflessness and courage as your guide. You will learn to understand the phrase that every warrior lives by — Never ask how many are the enemy, just where they are.”

He spoke with great passion and honor about the achievements and the great men who had made them possible, but just as the plaques on the wall remained anonymous, he never mentioned a name. *The service was supreme*, Kamal thought to himself, *and we are a part of that supremacy as long as the service allowed it.*

“Intelligence is a game of imperfect information. We can guess our opponent’s moves, but we can’t be sure of them until the game is over. As you will learn during your courses and your time here, the risks we take are real and sometimes deadly. We move chess pieces, countering the moves of our opponents, on an imaginary board that could be confined to the location we are in or spread across the entire globe. This is real-time strategy implementation. It isn’t for the weak of heart, it is for those who have the mental drive to be more than they ever imagined.”

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The Jungle launched a set of vital concepts for Kamal’s training and career as an operative — the need to know, the need to compartmentalize and the need to validate intelligence and its sources. The first briefings provided the foundation of his espionage education. During training, the candidates were regularly shuffled to locations where their instructors had organized ‘teachable’ moments. Sometimes the prepared location would be on the sprawling 5,000 acres, others could be hundreds of kilometers away. Kamal had a slight advantage over many of his batch mates because of the counter-intelligence training during the SSG course, but that slight advantage became much greater with his actual field experience.

The instructors at The Jungle, discounting a few devout Muslims, were alcohol-swilling spies ranging from good to amazing. They included seasoned officers like Colonel Akbar, a veteran of the Afghan conflict and a key trainer of the Mujahideen, and non-military personnel like Doctor Waqar Shah, a specialist in psychological warfare. Some had served as station chiefs, or cultural attachés as they were known to the outsiders, others were masters of covert operations whose tradecraft behind enemy lines had become the stuff of legend within the ranks of the military, keeping operations and operatives alive. They had worked in India, the United States, North Korea, China, Israel and other countries, both friendly and unfriendly to Pakistan.

Other instructors included paramilitary specialists, field operatives and linguists that



would help to get the candidates ready for situations and encounters that they would need to extract themselves from. One thing was made clear to all the candidates — if you are caught behind enemy lines, the ISI will distance itself from you.

*In other words, you're fucked six ways from Sunday*, Kamal thought to himself. That made the requirement to absorb information quickly and clearly imperative for every candidate. It would be their own skills that would get them out of hot water and to safety — the institution would not be able to save them until they were clear of all threats and then only if the intelligence was valuable to the institution, military and state of Pakistan. The Jungle was replete with stories of operatives that had been turned out into the cold when their objectives went belly up and didn't deliver quality intelligence to the headquarters.

The heart of intelligence, no matter how you looked at it, was human espionage. The best intelligence came from an operative's ability to understand and influence behavior, from polite conversation to overt threats, and maneuver through emotional cycles to get valuable information unavailable to others. This intelligence was the foundation of covert actions, which were in the realm of statecraft, a tool of foreign policy decision-makers. Those who excelled in this level of espionage were elevated to recruiters, the holy grail of spies, that were able to identify, engage and convince foreign nationals to turn against their own interests for personal rewards. The candidates were told that the ISI kept a list of politicians, bureaucrats and other influential people who had fallen into this trap and used that information to influence decisions on foreign policy and domestic matters.

"The greatest skill of any operative," Colonel Akbar explained, "is the ability to communicate." Communication was crucial to every facet of the intelligence gathering process. It did not matter if you were an expert at covert operations and influencing people. If you were unable to communicate that information back to the handlers in an understandable and actionable form, then you held less value. Decisions were not made based on the words of an operative, but on the quality of his reports. Every instructor in every course taught the candidates how to prepare reports ranging from intelligence briefings for 'customers', to operational and diplomatic cables. The focus was on quality of reporting so that it could be acted upon effectively.

Kamal surprised himself with the results of these classes. He wasn't a talkative person, and didn't consider himself a great communicator. He had always been solitary, and made few friends at The Jungle, except for those he had known coming in to the academy.

"It's not about volume, Kamal." Major Iftikhar shared a smoke with Kamal after lunch almost every day. "I think that's what's surprising you — you manage to say what you need in just a few words. It makes you a great communicator in my book."

"Thank you, Major." Kamal took the praise a little wryly. "It's an old habit of mine — I learned to be careful with my words around my dad." At the Major's questioning look, Kamal brushed aside any explanation. "I'll tell you about it...someday."

They had developed a bond during his time at The Bird's Nest, where Iftikhar had been one of his many instructors. Kamal had piqued his interest early in his commando training with his tenacity and unwillingness to accept defeat. The more time he spent with the young sniper, the more respect he developed for him. After Kamal earned his maroon beret, the two had stayed in touch as much as two serving soldiers could. When he walked in the door at The Jungle, Iftikhar saw an opportunity to impart the knowledge that he had gained during his two tours in the ISI.

The two would regularly sit together in the evenings, discussing his course material, techniques to better gather intelligence from unwilling participants and how to defeat the standard interrogation methods that were implemented against intelligence operatives. Some of these sessions included teachable moments where Iftikhar would create a situation from the surroundings. On one such evening, they sat enjoying dinner when Iftikhar noticed that Kamal had drawn the attention of an attractive young woman. She however, was with her parents, making the challenge significantly more interesting for him.

"She seems to be quite interested in you," Iftikhar noticed. "You should talk to her."

"Who?" Kamal replied nonchalantly.

"You're kidding, right?" Iftikhar asked. "You haven't noticed the young lady who has been trying to get your attention for the last twenty minutes? Maybe you aren't as observant as I thought, Kamal," he quipped laughing.

"Come on *yaar*, she's with her family," Kamal retorted. "Unapproachable," he observed drawing a devious smile from Iftikhar.

"You think people will just come to you and hand over information?" he asked. "Sometimes they are unapproachable and you still have to get the information. If you're going to disregard anyone who is unapproachable...well, maybe you should just quit The Jungle now," he replied, stone-faced.

"What exactly are you asking for, Iftikhar?"

"Three things," he said knowing that he had goaded Kamal into another game that would both entertain him while teaching Kamal. "First, get her name. Second, separate her from her family. Last, get her phone number."

"Now, I know you're joking," Kamal said with a grin. "All of those are impossible."

"One more thing, Captain," Iftikhar added. "You have five minutes to do all three," he said glancing at his watch.

Kamal sat stunned for a moment trying to determine if his mentor was serious. When he realized that Iftikhar's eyes were glued to his watch, he knew this was another one of his games.

Kamal assessed the environment, looking for a tactic that would allow him to approach the family and facilitate his three objectives. Looking down at the menu, he found his

opening and slowly got up from the table.

“Excuse me sir, I apologize for interrupting your meal,” Kamal said placing his hand on the father’s shoulder. The father looked up at him, wondering who the hell he was.

“My friend and I were watching how much you were enjoying your meal and hoped that we could ask what you were having,” Kamal politely continued.

The father was a bit surprised at the question, but Kamal’s good-natured politeness encouraged him to discuss the meal. “This is the...what is this...my daughter ordered the food,” he said motioning to the young lady across from him. “Laila, what did you order for me?”

Laila smiled as she looked at Kamal. “Abbu, that is the chicken Manchurian. Is it good?”

“It’s excellent, *beta*,” the father replied. Kamal, seeing his opening, turned his attention to the older woman at the table. “Ma’am, are you having the same thing?”

The woman glowed from the attention from the good-looking young man. “Oh, no *beta*. This is sweet and sour.”

“Ah, one of my personal favorites,” Kamal replied with a smile. “Laila, right?” Kamal asked pointing to the young lady. “You have something different than your parents. May I ask what that is?”

“This is zhajiangmian — noodles with sauce,” she said proudly, able to pronounce the name without a stumble.

“Zhajangman?” Kamal stammered out, slaughtering the name, but causing Laila to laugh with his attempt. “How do you say that again?”

“Zha-ji-ang-mian,” she said slowly enunciating the syllables for Kamal, who shook his head, pretending he would never be able to pronounce it correctly.

“Sir, could I ask a favor?” Kamal politely asked. “If you could spare your daughter for a moment, I’m a novice when it comes to good Chinese food and it’s my friend’s birthday. I would like him to have something interesting to eat and honestly, there is no way I’m going to remember how to pronounce that.”

The look on the father’s face changed from a laughing man to a protective father, scowling at Kamal’s request. The mother, on the other hand, gently nudged her daughter to help the kind man. “Go ahead, help the boy, Laila,” she said smiling at Kamal the whole time. She looked at him like a potential *daamad* for her young daughter who checked all the required boxes — young, good looking, polite and well-spoken.

Laila excused herself from the table and went with Kamal to the waiter station. Kamal called over a waiter and asked Laila to place the order for him.

“So what do you recommend?” Kamal asked, as the waiter joined them. Laila glanced over at Iftikhar and turned her attention to the menu. While she was considering the dishes, Kamal quietly mentioned that he had noticed that she was trying to get his

attention before he came over to the table. She blushed, caught in her own game, and rattled off four dishes to the waiter, trying to divert the conversation.

"I'd like to call you some time. Maybe speak when your parents aren't listening to every word," he said with a smile, shielding her from her parent's table as he slid a pen and paper to her. She hesitated for a second, making Kamal wonder if he had misread the situation, and then quickly took the pen, writing out an email address along with her phone number.

"Let's talk on email and chat first," she said sliding the paper back to him.

Kamal smiled, slipping it into his pocket, before turning and escorting her back to her parent's table.

"Sir, if you would allow," Kamal said. "For your kindness, I would like to buy you all dessert in honor of my friend's birthday."

The father protested, but Kamal insisted, calling the waiter over to the table. "Tell their server that they will be having dessert and to add it to my bill."

Kamal smiled, thanking Laila and her family for their assistance and returned to his own table.

Iftikhar tapped the face of his Timex. "Seven minutes," he said as Kamal sat down.

"Two minutes over, but I got 4 out of 3 objectives."

Iftikhar's eyebrow raised, "4 out of 3, how's that?"

"Name, Laila. She joined me at the insistence of her mother."

"That's two, Kamal."

"Phone number *and* email address. She would like to write and chat before speaking on the phone," Kamal added with a smirk. "Four out of three."

"Impressive, recruit. Now, tell me this," Iftikhar sat up in his chair. "Assess each person sitting at the table."

"The father is traditional, maybe central Punjab based on his accent. The mother is Lahori. She is looking for a suitor for her daughter and thought she hit the jackpot with me," Kamal said softly so that nearby tables wouldn't overhear him. "Laila is a modern girl, studying in one of the private colleges. You can see from the number of times she has looked over here since I sat down that she's interested."

Iftikhar returned to his reclined position and grinned, satisfied with the way the game played out. "So, are you going to pursue?"

Kamal thought for a second, looked over at Laila and smiled. Turning back to Iftikhar, he said, "Why not? Look at her."

Most of Iftikhar's teachable moments involved approaching women, Kamal had noted long ago. In this society, men didn't just walk up to women and start conversations. That was just not done. So the challenge of being able to glean the required information was much harder and a better test compared to the staged, controlled exercises at The Jungle.

Plus, Kamal thought, Iftikhar enjoyed watching Kamal get cut down to size by the women he approached. *His entertainment value at my expense.*

Instructors at The Jungle regularly tested the candidates on their ability to differentiate between fact-based intelligence and intuition, speculation and conjecture. Candidates were required to separate intelligence from operational information.

Years later, in the middle of a desperate mission, Kamal would remember one particular exercise they went through on a regular basis — an exercise that routinely got him out of hot water. He was introduced, over a course of several days, to ten people playing different roles in different places. Each told him ten different versions of the same story. His job was to find the intelligence and the operational information, as well as identify which of the ten could be recruited and how. In other exercises, the tables were turned to see how much information others could get from Kamal, with methods varying from gentle inquiries to hard interrogation tactics. All of the information would be drafted into an intelligence report that would be parsed by the instructor, leaving Kamal to wonder whether he had caught the right threads and identified the right people. This, much to Kamal's consternation, was a daily event at The Jungle.

The psychological training was peppered with tactical driving, close quarter combat, survival training, surveillance tactics and interrogation techniques to make the candidate a stronger operative, if they graduated with high enough marks to be put in the field. The goal of The Jungle was to create top-level operatives that could be posted to different stations around the world to gather intelligence, recruit potential spies and report back actionable information. Oh, and to stay alive in the harshest of conditions.

Kamal had excelled in the art of tradecraft and human espionage. He also tested very high in linguistics and intelligence gathering skills. His only weakness was his rudimentary knowledge of international affairs. As a result, there were stacks of history books, magazines and newspapers on his desk in the hostel. As his instructors regularly reminded him, he had to understand the history of the cultures to be able to effectively influence them.

He was luckier than most. His civilian classmates were almost all taking extra fitness training, including ten-mile hikes and runs through the forest.

"It's not fucking fair," said Irfan, one of the weakest members of the civilian students. Kamal irked him. "You get to lay in bed reading a stupid newspaper while I have to kill myself on the track every day!"

Kamal gave him a cold look. He'd joined the military because classroom studies bored him, and here he was, with his nose stuck in a book. The last thing he needed was a sniveling idiot whining about being out in the fresh air. "There's no such thing as an easy day at the office in the intelligence world. Get used to it."

## CHAPTER 5

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“Captain, you’ve graduated now. You don’t have to skulk in corners to smoke a cigarette.” Major Iftikhar found a scowling Kamal in a secluded corner of the stadium grounds at Camp Hamza, which were overflowing with people. “Why are you hiding?” It was a rhetorical question. Kamal didn’t mingle.

“Iffi.” Kamal nodded to his mentor and friend. The Major gave him a friendly slap on the back.

“Cheer up, *yaar*. This is a moment of celebration. Your career is just about to take off, and you’ve retreated to the only quiet place on the campus. Why aren’t you out there with your friends?”

“Because family’s out there.”

The Major’s eyebrows shot up at Kamal’s laconic reply. “Your...dad?” He knew that Kamal’s contact with his father was limited to visits home for Eid holidays, whenever possible, but few and far between compared to other enlisted men. There was no love lost between them. “Hmmm. Have you met him?”

“Not yet.” This wasn’t Kamal’s first graduation ceremony. Basic training, sniper school in Quetta, his medal awards and now the ISI Academy. Afzal Khan hadn’t been to a single one of the previous events. “It doesn’t matter, anyway.” Kamal shrugged off the question niggling at the back of his mind. “I’m more concerned with my first posting. I’m afraid I’ll spend the next year behind a desk at Military Intelligence in Gujranwala or Multan. Then, as my last year of ISI posting starts, I might get a posting to one of the ISI division offices but I’m not holding my breath for that one.”

Unlike other academies he had been to, the Jungle did not share final marks or grades with the candidates. These were passed directly to the Commandant along with respective instructor’s notes, which were added to the candidate’s file. Kamal did not receive a report on his overall performance, other than what he had gleaned from his instructors, making it hard to know where he might be posted. Nor could he eliminate possibilities by figuring out where his classmates were posted. His inner circle was tiny.

Since he joined the Academy, Kamal had worked hard not to become overly friendly with his fellow candidates. He was naturally reserved and reticent, but he was also concerned that anyone could pass incorrect or compromising information about him to the Commandant. Instructors were kept at arm’s length, keeping the relationship contained to the course and the material covered, with the exception of old colleagues like Iftikhar. Now that his time in the Jungle was over, no one knew more about Kamal than he wanted them to know and that was limited to superficial information that was already in his military files.

Iftikhar let Kamal change the subject. He had news for him, and had wanted to be the one who told him. “Kam, you should have a bit more confidence in your abilities,” he said, holding out a crisp, ivory envelope with an insignia in the top corner. Printed in bold in the center was Captain Kamal Khan.

Kamal hesitated for a moment before he reached for the envelope, trying to read the Major’s somber expression. *Good news? Bad news? Damn the man. He deserves to be an instructor here; I can’t tell a bloody thing.* He held the slim envelope in his hand, trying to guess the result by its weight. “Do you know where I’ve been posted?”

The Major rolled his eyes. “Just open the damn envelope.”

Kamal pulled out his pocketknife and slit the top open at the seam. Minutes seemed like hours as he took in the information printed on the heavy bond ivory letter inside. *Was this a practical joke? Good one, Iffi.* But as Kamal reread the letter a second time, it began to sink in that this was no joke.

“Due to your extensive experience and proven abilities in the field, the ISI is proud to post Captain Kamal Khan to the ISI divisional office in Peshawar, Pakistan for the period of one year, as a field operative,” Kamal read the words aloud. “Is this for real, Iffi?”

“All the instructors were extremely impressed with your abilities, both in the classroom and out. The commandant still can’t understand how you were able to keep information about yourself so controlled from your own batch mates,” Iftikhar said, laughing. “We all believed that you would make an outstanding field operative, so we recommended that the command put you in the field.”

If Kamal had yelled out in excitement and celebration, Iftikhar would have been stunned. Kamal kept his distance and hid his emotions as though it were second nature. He wasn’t disappointed. Kamal nodded gratefully, and carefully folded the letter back into the envelope. *Would Dad be proud? Or would he just not care?* He gave his friend a calculating look. “Want to meet my father?”

Iftikhar grinned. “Need a buffer, or do you have something else in mind?”

“It wouldn’t be wise for me to spill blood on this sacred ground. You’re coming along for *his* protection.”

They put out their cigarettes and pushed through the crowd still milling around the parade ground. It had thinned considerably, as most of the military personnel had dispersed, leaving families hanging around waiting for their sons. After the parade, most of the new operatives rushed to their commanders for their posting letters, dreaming of being appointed to a Pakistani consulate or embassy where they could rub elbows with the influential diplomatic world. Kamal knew, however, that this was a highly unlikely scenario; they would be posted to either division or field offices around Pakistan to be trained further during live action exercises. A select few, those who had many years in military service, would get posted to foreign countries to join on-going operations as

administrative staff.

Kamal's father was seated alone, well towards the back of the rows of chairs set up for families. *I'm shocked. Not only did he come to the graduation, it looks like he's actually waiting for me.*

As Kamal headed toward him, Afzal Khan rose from his seat, meeting his son halfway. He stopped when he realized that his son was not alone.

"Abbu, this is Major Iftikhar, one of my training instructors," Kamal preempted what he assumed would be a sarcastic, derisory greeting from his father. "He was also my training officer during SSG training."

Afzal Khan's hand pushed forward to meet Iftikhar's; with a half smile he said, "I hope that he hasn't been too much trouble for you."

Kamal fought the urge to roll his eyes.

"Trouble?" Iftikhar sounded confused. "Kamal has been one of my best students. Which would explain his continued success and growth in the armed forces. He has the ability to absorb information like a sponge and execute it like a seasoned veteran."

Afzal Khan looked taken aback. "Well...well. It's good to hear that he has been able to do something right in his life." Afzal, looking derisively at his son, missed the flash of anger that lit up the Major's eyes. "I am taking him for lunch; would you like to join us?"

Iftikhar responded with a smooth charm, but Kamal knew him well enough to know from the stiff shoulders that Iftikhar was pissed. "Actually, Kamal has to attend a briefing with his new commanding officer right now. He needs to be brought up to speed on his posting, so he probably won't be able to leave the Academy."

Afzal Khan wasn't used to being refused, but he couldn't tell if Iftikhar was lying, and Kamal's face was maddeningly blank as well. There was a small awkward silence as Afzal tried to think of an appropriate comeback. The two faces before him were stiff and unwelcome, and for the first time in his life, he felt like an outsider.

"So, Kamal, where have you been posted?"

Before Kamal could even reach for his posting orders, Iftikhar replied. "Sorry, sir. That's classified. The location of an asset is never disclosed, not even to family members. I will be your point of contact if you need information." He offered his business card to Afzal Khan. "This is done for both parties' security."

Afzal had no military background, much less training in espionage, so he was unable to question anything Iftikhar was telling him.

"Kamal, we should be going. The Colonel is waiting for us in the Commandant's office," Iftikhar said, grabbing Kamal's arm. "It was a pleasure meeting you. If you need any information about Kamal, please feel free to contact me."

Dismissed and rebuffed, Afzal Khan's face fell. He felt that he had made an effort — he had come to his son's graduation. The least he should have gotten in return was a cordial lunch. Granted, he had been prepared to find that Kamal barely scraped through, that he



would return to the family home, and be available to shoulder some of his own burdens.

Instead, with a quick formal goodbye, Kamal and Iftikhar turned around and headed for the main building. Kamal fought the urge to turn around one last time. He'd seen the expression on his father's face, and was a little surprised and angry at him. *Did he really think that appearing at one graduation would make up for missing the rest? For beating me with his belt when I was too small to defend myself? For either ignoring me or putting me down for most of my life* "Is the Colonel really waiting for me?" Kamal asked Iftikhar when they were out of earshot from his father.

"Did you *want* to go to lunch with daddy?" Iftikhar retorted.

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Peshawar had never been foreign territory to Kamal, having family scattered around the city working in government offices. His own level of familiarity with the city rivaled that of any of the permanent residents; he had grown up in University Town, the 'old money' of the city, during his primary education. He had often joked with friends that he couldn't move in the city without running into someone that he knew. He would have to make great efforts to avoid that this time around, he thought to himself, otherwise there would be questions that he could not honestly answer.

As a city, conquered, captured and ruled by kings and invaders throughout history, it had always held strategic importance. It had seen the defeat of the Hindu ruler Raja Jaipal the mighty Mehmud Ghaznavi called it home, and the British Army officers had hosted Afghan rulers in the city. At the center of Peshawar's history was Bala Hissar Fort, guarding the entry to the city from the east. The fort itself was now the headquarters of the Frontier Corps or FC, a paramilitary organization responsible for policing the tribal areas of the province. All domestic intelligence agencies maintained offices within the walls of the mighty fort and it would be Kamal's reporting station for the next year.

Kamal's entered Peshawar not via his family's luxury vehicles but on a commuter bus launched from Rawalpindi. Commuter buses in Pakistan didn't follow speed limits or practice safe driving, but hurtled towards their destination as if there were a pot of gold to be won. The Peshawar bus station, just three kilometers from the mighty fort, was a melting pot of all of Pakistan's many peoples with every province and religion represented among the travelers. For those new to the city, the bus station was intimidating with the overflow of noise, culture and flavors that symbolized the Pashtun people, whom Kamal considered a largely misunderstood people. Their own political 'leadership', for their own benefit, characterized them as gun-loving, Quran-thumping, and backward-thinking. What most didn't understand was that this outdated stereotype was quickly being replaced by a highly educated, liberal-thinking nouveau riche. Kamal recalled a conversation with his

basic training batch mates where he had characterized his culture divided into two groups, one that was uneducated and highly motivated, the other that was highly educated and unmotivated. The sad part of that equation was that neither mingled or assisted the other, even if they were from the same family. *A failure of the Pathan culture*, Kamal had always thought to himself, but never said publicly.

As he exited the bus station, he heard the familiar sounds of taxi drivers trying, in their heavily Pashto-accented Urdu, to coax passengers to their vehicles. Kamal chuckled to himself, recalling his own experiences in Islamabad and Lahore, where people would be able to identify him as a Pathan just by his Urdu. A driver came up to him, reaching to take his luggage from his hand, quickly asking, “*Taxi chahiya? Kaban jarayi?*”

Kamal thought for a quick second. “*Green’s Hotel tha zoo.*”

The driver smiled and asked, “Pathan? *Shuker Allah! Pa khair raglay!*”

*Pa khair raglay*, or ‘thank god you arrived safely’, was a significant greeting to any Pathan. Kamal had grown up hearing it whenever he visited his mother’s family, but rarely amongst his father’s relatives. It was a term, much like the entire language of Pashto, full of affection, respect and hospitality for their fellow human beings.

The taxi driver kept up a steady flow of conversation on the short drive to Peshawar Saddar and Green’s Hotel. He had questions about Kamal’s background and complaints about the performance of the elected government, mostly the continued neglect of the province’s needs in favor of the Punjab. Kamal personally agreed with him, having seen the development and opportunities available to Punjabis; but in an army that was dominated by Punjabis, he kept his own counsel. Back home in Peshawar, he let loose, agreeing with almost every complaint, and adding a few of his own.

The drive to Peshawar Saddar traversed two different areas of the city. If you went through the normal commuter route, you would be taken past the historic Peshawar Library, empty due to lack of funding and importance, the Railway station and Edwards College, a premier learning institution from the time when the British ruled a unified India. The other direction, and the way that the taxi driver took Kamal, travelled past the provincial assembly, Pearl Continental Hotel and the Corps Commander Peshawar’s home. The driver turned towards Governor’s House and shot through the Cantonment area to Green’s Hotel, a relic of the hospitality industry of Peshawar. At the hotel, Kamal quickly emerged from the taxi, thanked and paid the driver and ascended the steps into the hotel.

This hotel did not have the airs or amenities of other hotels. There was no bellboy to take luggage from the car, no large garden area, just a nondescript building with a large sign in the heart of the Peshawar business district. Inside the hotel, the paint chipped from the walls and stains covered the carpets. But this hotel did carry a great deal of historical significance. During the Afghan conflict, the Mujahideen leadership would regularly

gather at the hotel to meet their ISI and CIA handlers. There were rumors that Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omer had stayed on the top floor of the hotel for weeks at a time, prior to safe houses being established in University Town that would provide more security. Kamal had been planted at the hotel to follow the same path.

The dim reception area was small. He didn't have a reservation; occupancy of the hotel had significantly decreased with the expansion of the hospitality industry into the more open and centrally located University Town, and he wasn't worried about getting a room. A skinny young man stood behind the desk, friendly and helpful. Looking into the mirror behind the receptionist, Kamal realized he looked more like the typical Pathan than the military officer he had become, but it was all part of the show. Kamal ran a hand over his bristly chin. The transformation included growing a beard that hadn't yet fully grown out and he scratched at it as he waited. His hair was longer too, flopping on his forehead and annoying him almost as much as the beard. *This is going to take some getting used to.*

The receptionist finally found a room for Kamal and placed the booking card in front of him to fill. Taking the pen, Kamal read the form over once before making a mark. Then, with a confident smile, he started.

Name: Dawood Islam.

## CHAPTER 6

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“So tell me about Kaleem?” the visitor asked, keeping a close watch on the door to the teahouse, knowing that at any moment things could go sideways.

Kamal had been in Peshawar for two months now and had finally started to settle into a daily routine, with intermittent ‘visitors’. The visitors were nondescript messengers sent from Kamal’s handler to gather any new intelligence that he had acquired. He knew nothing of them and they knew nothing of him, other than a signal that would identify one to the other. This was the essence of human intelligence in an environment where a legend could not use technology, and Peshawar was such an environment for Kamal. His legend had been crafted by his handler with a great deal of planning to make sure that he would be able to support any story that he told. Kamal had been taught in training that the best legends were sixty percent true, so that the operative could embellish without worrying about remembering too many new details.

In the two months that he’d spent in Peshawar, Kamal Khan had successfully immersed himself into his new identity. He was now Dawood Islam.

Dawood had moved from Green’s Hotel to a rented room with three others who worked alongside him, constructing a commercial plaza on University Road. His evenings were spent in the masjid near his rented room studying the Quran from the masjid Imam. Dawood spent as much time as he could outside his cockroach-infested room. It reeked of male body odor and garbage. Peshawar was unusually hard hit by the electricity shortages in the country. With so many hours without a running fan, his roommates were forced to open the window, letting in the rancid aroma of the rotting garbage heap outside the window; another ingredient that made living there unbearable. *Why couldn’t these people clean up after themselves?* Dawood would think to himself late at night when sleep escaped him. *This was supposed to be the more respectable, old money area of the city.* He could only dream of being able to save enough to be able to find a better residence away from the garbage heap, or at least away from the other men in his crew.

“Dawood?! Are you still with me?” asked the visitor, trying to bring him back to the table. “What can you tell me about Kaleem?” Dawood pulled himself back from the abyss that was the horror of his life for the past two months.

“Kaleem is complicated,” Dawood started, slipping the cigarette back into his mouth, deliberately drawing out the brief pause to give himself time to figure out the best way to describe his new friend. Kaleem and Dawood had become close since he joined the construction site.

“He’s pissed off at the world,” Dawood continued. “Seems to have had a lot of hard breaks in his life.” He hesitated again; he could easily have been this guy had he not joined

the military.

“What kind of hard breaks?” said the visitor, taking a black notepad from his pocket and opening it in front of him. Dawood raised his eyebrows.

“I thought you guys were supposed to be able to retain information, not write it down in open view,” Dawood said glancing between the notebook and the visitor. “That won’t get me any points around here.”

“I have to write some things down, otherwise I won’t be able to give all the information to your uncle,” the visitor said with a shrug. Dawood shook his head, trying to understand how these idiots were assigned as messengers. *Couldn’t the agency give these people recorders?* Something this minute could compromise him if the wrong people saw it.

The visitor glanced at his watch impatiently. He didn’t understand how being seen with him would be a risk for Dawood. They could be old friends, after all. “The hard breaks?” he asked again.

Dawood took a biscuit from the plate and dipped it into his tea, deliberately stalling his answer to let the anger subside. “His father beat the hell out of him, stuck him in a madrassah and made him work for a mechanic in the village.” He paused, taking another drag from his cigarette before continuing. “The mechanic used to molest him, liked to fuck him after the other daily wagers went home for the night. Really screwed him up as a kid.”

“Damn! What happened to the bastard?” the visitor intently asked, shocked more by Dawood’s flat monotone than the words themselves. “What did the father do?”

Dawood glanced over the edge of his teacup. “Nothing. Well, at least to the mechanic.” The visitor shook his head in disbelief, about to say something when Dawood continued. “The father, the wonderful man that he was, beat the living shit out of him. Because the mechanic kept the kid back after hours, he was routinely late going back home. After yet another late night, the father hit him so hard that he broke Kaleem’s arm and a couple of ribs, landing him in the hospital. While he was there, the madrassah teacher paid him a visit and heard all the gory details.”

Dawood saw the shock and horror spread over the visitor’s face. “The mechanic’s body was found in a ravine near the Swat River in Batkhela. The father hasn’t been seen since then. People just assumed that after beating the hell out of his kid, he went and killed the mechanic before he disappeared. Kaleem became a permanent fixture at the madrassah until he moved to Peshawar a year ago to earn for his sister’s wedding.”

“Where does he spend his time in Peshawar?” asked the visitor, as he continued to scribble notes. “I mean, other than the construction site.”

“Kaleem’s day is quite simple. Work, pray, eat, work night job, sleep whenever possible. He lives at the masjid,” Dawood said. “He drives a taxi when he’s not on the construction site.” Dawood recalled one of his batch mates telling him about being posted as a taxi

driver in Quetta. The relationship between the owner of the vehicle and the driver was simple. The owner would get Rs. 5000 a month and the driver would be responsible for all expenses and repairs to the vehicle. Motivated individuals could earn large sums in short periods and for someone like Kaleem, this was the perfect equation.

Dawood stared hard at the visitor, gauging his response and understanding of the entire situation. He didn't want his handler to hear an emotionless story from a messenger that could not empathize. "Empathy is the greatest asset of any field operative," Lt. Colonel Riaz taught his students in *The Jungle*. "It allows you to build influence over your asset, and you're more likely to gain their trust." *That was the difference between messengers and field operatives.* Dawood kept the thought to himself as the visitor finally looked up from his notepad.

"So, this is your guy?" the visitor asked callously, almost inviting Dawood to reach across and bounce his head off the table. Granted, had they been somewhere less public, *Kamal* probably would have taken advantage of the opportunity, but they were in a teahouse that Dawood frequented. The visitor quickly tried to backtrack his question, as Dawood's eyes narrowed to slits, realizing the error he had made. "Ah, I didn't mean to offend. It was just a question," he sputtered, hoping the apology would keep his nose intact.

Dawood, unimpressed with the reversal, motioned to the waiter for two more cups of tea, before turning his attention back to the visitor, "You do understand what we are doing here, right? This is an innocent man's life we are talking about. He didn't sign up for what we're planning to do to him..." The visitor interrupted him before he could complete his sentence.

"Isn't that your job, Dawood? To sign him up?" Sure that any possibility of violence had passed, the visitor risked a smug attitude. "And please keep the attitude for someone who really matters. This is a job for me and for you. Nothing more, nothing less."

Dawood couldn't believe the arrogance of this little fucker. *Here we are talking about using an innocent in a covert operation and he thinks it's just another day at the office.* Dawood wondered if steam was pouring from his ears as his anger boiled, but he couldn't afford to make a scene here. Too many people knew him as Dawood and he couldn't take the risk that someone from *Kamal's* life may be around. Drawing attention to himself was not an option. Taking a deep breath, he pulled another cigarette from the now empty pack and tapped it on the table. Striking a match, he lit the cigarette and exhaled the smoke in the visitor's direction. With a second drag, he dropped the match into his empty teacup, and asked softly, "Have you ever watched someone's soul leave their body?"

The confidence that the visitor had seconds ago disappeared instantly, as Dawood's heavily redacted file flashed in his head. He remembered the words printed on the front sheet; precision sniper, battlefield tested, close-quarter combat specialist, but the words

that hit the hardest were the one hundred kills. *This was not the guy to piss off*, the visitor thought to himself, leaning back from the table, trying to put some distance between Dawood and himself. The color drained from his dark face. He stammered, “no,” licking his parched lips in a blatantly nervous gesture.

Dawood noted the visitor’s body language with contempt. *Fucking amateur*. He leaned forward across the table, cigarette dangerously close to the visitor’s hand. “Until you do, *if* you ever do, behave as if you have a red dot on your forehead.” Dawood unflinchingly said. “We may decide to sacrifice *you* to the cause one day.”

Dead silence.

A waiter placed two cups of fresh tea on the table. He chuckled as he walked away, shouting instructions to the cook for another table that had arrived. Dawood turned his attention back to the visitor. “I’ll take care of Kaleem. You find your way home and don’t ever let me see you again.” His tone was matter-of-fact and dismissive, but it sent a chill up the visitor’s spine. “I won’t be as polite the next time.”

Getting up from the table, Dawood called to the cashier. “Lala, my friend will be paying the bill. Make sure to give him the special rate.” He laughed as he walked out, tossing his half-smoked cigarette to the ground, crushing it under his stride. He looked back and grinned at the visitor, lifting his hand to touch the middle of his forehead, a promise of what would happen if they crossed paths again.

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Kaleem was missing from the construction site for a few days after the meeting, which struck Dawood as very odd for someone that worked so hard. He inquired at the masjid, but all anyone knew was that he had packed his things and left days ago. No one knew where he was and very few were concerned about it. Days passed with no sign of Kaleem at either location and Dawood worried that his own agency had decided to take matters into their own hands, but he couldn’t ask too many questions without raising suspicions about himself. A week later, however, Kaleem strolled back onto the construction site, silent about his sudden disappearance. But Dawood was patient, knowing that he would get the information from him in due course. He was frankly relieved to see him alive.

Weeks passed between the two with no mention of the disappearance, until one day Dawood invited Kaleem to join him for lunch. It was a Friday and there was no work for the daily wager, so the day was free to spend however they chose. Kaleem, who struggled to make ends meet after sending money home to his family, jumped at the chance of having a proper meal. A man can only survive for so many days on *daal* and *roti*, Dawood thought to himself, and the best way to gain his cooperation was with money, which Kaleem desperately needed.

As they climbed into the taxi outside the masjid, Dawood crowed, “*Yaar*, the boys played outstanding yesterday. One thing our boys can do better than anyone else is play cricket!”

The comment drew the attention of the taxi driver, whose smile became visible in the rearview mirror.

“Pakistan has the best bowling attack in all of cricket!” he agreed before turning his focus back to the road to the old city of Peshawar.

“Waseem, Waqar and Shoaib bowled so clean. And Afridi! What a batsmen! *Chuckles* and *chaunkas* on almost every ball.” Kaleem replied with a smile. “I wish I could play half as good. I would never need to work!” Pointing at a huge Pepsi billboard, he asked, “How much do you think they get for those?”

“*Crores*, Kaleem. They’re salesmen for all these companies,” Dawood answered pointing to another billboard with a cricketer’s face emblazoned on it. “It’s all *haraam* though. What they earn from these things. The Quran says that we should only keep what we need to live, the rest should be given to the needy.” Dawood knew Kaleem was a devout in his beliefs and was going to use that devotion to build his trust.

Laughing and joking during the drive, Dawood formed a quick plan on how to approach Kaleem about his sudden disappearance from Peshawar. “Did you get married without telling anyone?” *Keep it light and friendly*. “I would have gotten a room in a hotel, brother, but to not invite me is unfair,” Dawood teased.

Kaleem burst out laughing at the implication and slapped Dawood on the shoulder, “No, no, *yaar*. The only wedding in my near future is my sister’s and I’m killing myself trying to pay for that. Why would I look for another way to spend more money?”

“On a wife? You might get lucky. You might get a rich wife.”

“But I’d still have to pay for a wedding.”

They both laughed about the costs of keeping a wife and how difficult it would be on the daily wages they currently earned, but Dawood was resolute in his plan to get the information he needed.

“So where did you go, if not to get married?”

“You remember I told you about my Imam and how he had helped me?”

Dawood nodded. Kaleem took a quick glance at the rearview mirror to see if the driver was paying any attention to them. He seemed to be satisfied, because he continued. “He sent someone to ask me to return to the village because he needed something from me.”

Before he could go on, the car drew up at Namak Mandi, the old city’s most famous dining location, and home of Chars’is, Peshawar’s most sought-after *karahi* restaurant. Dawood paid the driver while Kaleem went in the doors to look for a table under a fan. This would be the only opportunity he had to get the information from Kaleem and Kaleem seemed ready to share it.



Dawood had been to Charsi's several times as Kamal during his school days, but was confident that no one at the restaurant would know his name. It was a very busy restaurant, and hundreds of people passed through every week. Entering the restaurant, he smiled, said hello and placed an order for cold Pepsi bottles immediately and two kilos of salt roasted ribs, a favorite of every Pathan who visited Charsi's. As he suspected, the staff at the restaurant were courteous and pleasant, but had no idea who he was. Kaleem was waving to him from a corner table he had secured and Dawood, satisfied that he remained anonymous, headed towards him.

He had planned the lunch at a time when most people would either have left or would be leaving, so the chances of running into anyone he knew were greatly decreased. Weaving in and out of the scattered *charpais*, he found his way to the table through the remaining crowd of diners and waiters, asking Kaleem as he sat down, "Have you ever been here before?"

"No, but I have always wanted to come here. Everyone talks about this place," Kaleem replied. "Is the food really as good as they say?"

"Charsi is as famous for his food as he is for all the other things that go on here," Dawood said, laughing. "You can fly really high here in the evening, if you know who to ask." He waited and watched carefully to see if Kaleem would take the bait. Dawood had smoked hashish during his school days in Peshawar, but had not touched it since joining the military. If Kaleem smoked, or if Dawood could get him to try it, however, there was a possibility that Kaleem would loosen up enough to open up.

Kaleem smiled sheepishly, but admitted to his guilty pleasure. "We didn't get good *chars* back home, and I can't afford more than a cigarette or two of the good stuff in Peshawar." Dawood didn't hesitate. He signaled to the waiter.

"Are the VIP rooms available?" Dawood asked. A block of rooms in the alleyway behind the restaurant were set aside specifically for smokers and other '*do number*' activities. The waiter smiled and nodded. "Let's go!" Dawood slipped a thousand rupees into the waiter's hand. "Get one *tola* of the best stuff from Charsi, a pack of Gold Leaf and a box of matches. Tell Charsi, I want the best stuff for my guest. He has travelled a long way to come here. He should not leave disappointed." He stood, gesturing to Kaleem to join him, as he followed the waiter from the main hall to the rooms in the alleyway, stopping briefly to collect the contraband.

Having been a regular visitor to the café, Dawood knew the lavish comforts of the VIP rooms, but the fifty yards crossing to them was enough to make anyone lose their appetite. To either side of the narrow pathway were piles of dung heaps, not just from animals, but from the residents of the flats that buttressed against the café's back wall. This was the old city of Peshawar and new buildings were rarely approved for this section, so much of the housing was without bathrooms, and running water was a luxury in the more modern

ones. Across the alleyway were dilapidated and low-rent hotels specifically for travelers that ventured to Peshawar for day-trips to shop in the old city before returning to their port of call. As they walked through the alleyway and ascended the stairs, Dawood pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and covered his mouth and nose, but Kaleem just walked through, unfazed by the pungent odor that filled the air.

The waiter unlocked the door to a VIP room, entering to turn on the lights, air conditioning and overhead fans. Dawood stopped at the door to remove his sandals and told Kaleem to do the same. “Bring your shoes in with you — they tend to get ‘lost’ if left outside.”

Kaleem froze in the doorway, astonished that such luxury existed in the same area as the dilapidated housing that surrounded it.

The room looked like the drawing room of any middle class household, from the carpeted floor to the TV hanging in the corner. The foam mattresses scattered around the lounge, a staple in every Pathan household, were a finer quality than either could afford for themselves. The room was already cooling rapidly, a blessing considering the amount of load-shedding happening in the city. The waiter reached over and turned on the TV, quickly tuning it to the on-going cricket match. With his work done, he moved to the door and stopped to ask for further instructions from his patrons. Kaleem settled down on a mattress, engrossed in the match. Dawood smiled. *That’s gone for a six. We’ll be coming here again, for sure.* He turned to the waiter and asked him to bring their food order to the room, turning to ask Kaleem, “Beef, mutton or chicken?” before confirming. “Check back in thirty minutes to see if we need anything else and bring the ribs as soon as possible.” Dawood told the waiter before planting himself on the mattress across from Kaleem.

“Everyone should enjoy this level of comfort in their lives, even if only for a day,” he said to Kaleem, who was completely lost in the cricket match. He nodded without moving his eyes from the large TV. Dawood smiled and removed the hashish from his pocket along with the cigarettes and placed both on the table. He emptied the tobacco from four cigarettes onto a sheet of paper, and casually brought up the topic he most wanted to know about. “So you were telling me about your Imam calling you back to the village. What did he need from you?”

## CHAPTER 7

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The sergeant pulled Dawood's door open. "Get out of the car. We need to check your documents," he said briskly. Dawood had stood at checkpoints early in his military career and he knew the routine, so he climbed out without a fuss, pulling his wallet from the side pocket of his *kameez*.

"Is there a problem, sir?" Dawood asked, handing the sergeant his Pakistani ID card. Behind him, he heard the whine of an electronic window coming down.

"This is your first time in Timergara?" the sergeant asked Dawood, examining the masterful fake ID in his hands. "Where are you coming from, Dawood sahib?"

"Yes, first time in Timergara. I'm coming from Peshawar, but belong to Swat," Dawood answered, carefully keeping his voice even.

"From Swat, but this is your first time here?" the sergeant inquired with disbelief. "We see a lot of vehicles from Swat here."

"Sir, many of my friends have been here, but I've spent most of my life in Punjab working on construction sites," Dawood offered as an explanation for the anomaly the sergeant identified. "I only come home to Swat for holidays."

The sergeant seemed satisfied with the explanation, as he changed his line of questioning. "What brings you to our quiet village?"

"Sir, I am a guest of my friend, Kaleem, and his host, Imam Shahid," Dawood pointed to the two gentlemen in the back seat of the Prado. "We work together on the same construction site in Peshawar and he invited me to his village. I am hoping we will have time to visit my village in Swat for a few days as well."

The sergeant looked over his shoulder, finding Imam Shahid seated there, listening closely to the conversation. The sergeant smiled, handing back Dawood's ID card, and motioned to the driver that he could go. "Enjoy your stay."

Dawood pushed the ID card in his breast pocket and climbed back into the front seat of the Prado. With a wave, he said "Thank you" to the soldier as the vehicle pulled away. Looking back through the passenger mirror at the dwindling checkpost, he saw a major approach the sergeant. *Protocol*, thought Dawood, *our officers ask questions after any lengthy stop to make sure that there was nothing unusual*. But as the double-door cleared the bridge, he watched the major pull his cell phone from his pocket and start talking. Dawood wondered for a moment if he was letting 'someone' in Peshawar know that 'Dawood Islam' had entered Dir with the Imam, but no one knew that he was coming here. The trip had been scheduled so hurriedly that he had no time to notify his handler or any of the three messengers that he was in contact with. *Wait*, he thought, *this was the Frontier Corps, not the Pakistan Army*. Their loyalty was to the notable families of the area where they were

stationed, providing security to some of Pakistan's most wanted, and not to the uniform they wore. Had his cover just been blown? *Was there possibly a weak link in my legend? Would the FC be able to access his true identity?* He forced the suspicions out of his mind. *Just stay alert. You'll be fine — the ISI have been doing this for years. They know how to keep secrets.*

Dawood shifted uncomfortably in his seat, recalling Imam Shahid's insistence that he sit in the front passenger seat. *He literally pushed me in*, Dawood recalled. The front seat was the hot seat in any vehicle, because vision of what was happening in the back seat was blocked, providing an opportunity to anyone who wanted to avail it. Dawood suddenly wasn't sure if coming to Timergara alone was such a good idea.

A few kilometers in, the Imam started pointing out the different tourist sites on the road to his home. Dawood tuned out most of the lesson. His mind was still at the checkpost, remembering the sergeant's nameplate, the cut of his uniform; he wondered if the major's stripes matched his shoulder ranking (*damn, how did he miss that?*); he did remember the vehicles that were parked at the checkpoint. *Everything is important now*, Dawood thought to himself, unsure if he had been compromised. He found it interesting that of all the people in the protocol, he was the only one searched. *This can't be a good thing*, he thought to himself.

"Dawood," the Imam said from the backseat, breaking the train of conspiracy theories in his head. "Where in Swat do you come from?"

For a moment, Dawood pretended not to hear him, engrossing himself in the passing scenery. *I can't let something like the checkpost shake me. Get it together, Kamal! I mean, Dawood.* The Imam touched him on the shoulder. "Dawood, is everything alright?"

"Fine, Imam sahib! I was just thinking of calling my uncle to let him know that I've arrived safely," Dawood finally responded. "I belong to Mingora now, but my family is from Madyan."

"What a beautiful place Madyan is!" The Imam commented, "I have stayed there with students from the madrassah on a tour. The scenery is just amazing there and the food is delicious."

"Yes, sir," Dawood answered. "I make a point of visiting Kalam whenever I come to Swat. I love to sit in the water with the fish swimming around my feet."

"I think that you will enjoy your time with us," the Imam said. "Kaleem has told us a great deal about your conversations with him. He doesn't keep secrets from his family and has been talking about you ever since you both met."

"I hope he's been saying good things," Dawood laughed, looking into the back seat for the first time since the encounter with the FC sergeant. "I've treated him like a younger brother since I met him," shooting a smile at the silent Kaleem.

"Of course, good things. Why would I go to so much trouble if he had told us bad things?" The Imam was laughing heartily. Dawood pinned a smile on his face, his jaw

aching from the effort.

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The vehicles turned down a dusty road and significantly increased their speed, simultaneously increasing Dawood's uneasiness. He sat quietly in the front of the vehicle, doing his best to note where they had turned off from the main road. *About 70 kilometers from the checkpoint.* In the distance, a shadow started to emerge on the horizon, slowly growing as the vehicles moved toward it. Closing in, the Imam proudly announced from the back seat. "We are here. Dawood *beta*, this is my home." From behind concrete walls lined with barbed wire, Dawood saw a tall building, rectangular, and solid; two stories and the rooftop, from what Dawood could tell.

The security vehicle rushed past the Prado in the last kilometer and began blowing its horn frantically. A large black security bar blocking the front gate was lifted and a couple of men quickly pulled open the gate to the house, with the security vehicle pulling to a hard stop to the right of the security bar. Armed bodyguards descended, loading their weapons and scanning the area for any potential threats. The Prado whisked past them into the driveway and the gate was pulled shut behind them.

A heavily armed, military-looking man opened Dawood's door and gestured for him to descend from the vehicle. Dawood paused for a minute, looking at the man and examining his multiple weapons, before stepping on the runner and down to the ground. *This guy is as heavily armed as we were during protection duty. He has to have a military background; obviously, this is no ordinary Imam.*

The sweeping glance that he was able to take identified a guard post at the gate, another above the grounds in the far left and armed men patrolling the balcony of the second floor. Dawood assumed that inside there would be more security in other quarters of the house. He wasn't disappointed. The foyer had security cameras mounted outside the door and along the stairs leading to the second floor. The home seemed to be in a heightened state of security for his visit, which unsettled him even more. It was lavishly decorated with marble floors and wooden banisters on the sweeping curve of the staircase. The furniture looked expensive, and intricate local crafts hung on the walls and on console tables. *House? This is more like a mansion.*

"Imam sahib, I hope you haven't gone to any special trouble on my account?" Dawood said as they climbed the circular stairway, watching the movements of the security personnel carefully. *Two at the door, one at what looks like the door to the kitchen, a back door, maybe? He looked up. One at the landing.*

The Imam stopped three stairs up from him and turned to look back. "Do all the guns bother you? You know that this area isn't safe and we can't always trust the FC to protect

us, so I make sure that my family is safe whether I am home or not,” he replied nonchalantly.

“It’s always like this when I visit Imam sahib’s home, Dawood *bhai*,” Kaleem put his hand on this shoulder. “This is how life is in the tribal areas.”

Dawood walked slowly up the stairs, falling in behind Kaleem. Surreptitiously, he scoped out his environment, trying to identify different escape routes if the need arose. Windows seemed to be the best bet. There were guards at all the entrances.

The whole scenario unsettled Dawood.

He stopped on the landing of the second floor, believing that was where they would be seated, assuming that the next floor up was actually the roof. Much to his surprise, Kaleem and the Imam were climbing the stairs to the roof.

“Dawood *bhai*, we are up another floor,” Kaleem called back down, motioning for Dawood to join them. Dawood, slightly embarrassed, scrambled, jumping stairs to catch up to Kaleem.

“Isn’t it too hot to sit on the roof?” Dawood asked Kaleem as they moved in stride up the staircase, “Does the house have...”

The words choked in Dawood’s throat as he got his first look at the security door on the third floor. The Imam was awaiting their arrival by the door. From the outside of the building, the naked eye would never have been able to determine that this floor existed. The idea of sitting behind secure, locked doors worried him. *Why would you serve lunch behind a security door?* Dawood was concerned about the level of security that was available to a simple mullah in a region where mullahs were extremely respected.

With all three assembled at the door, someone from inside the room triggered the electronic lock and released the door. Dawood felt like he had walked onto a floor at GHQ with the sheer state-of-the-art security that was installed. The entire floor was air-conditioned to the point that he had to roll down his sleeves and button his cuffs. The floor and walls looked to be soundproofed with no natural light entering from anywhere. *No windows. I’ve lost that bet.* They walked through the hallway toward an ominous black door at the end of the hall, but with each step Dawood wondered what he had gotten himself into.

Behind the door was an expansive, handcrafted wooden dining table with high-back leather chairs. The room had lighting above the table, but the rest of the room was completely dark and uninviting. *Is this a formal meeting room for government officials or the dining room for guests?* Dawood pulled a chair out and sat down. He strained to see beyond the darkness, to see if anyone was lurking there, but with the bright light above him, his eyes couldn’t adjust. He had to rely on his ears instead, and hoped for a few moments of silence before they started lunch.

It was almost like the Imam had a silent buzzer in his hand, because as soon as they sat

down, servers immediately emerged from the darkness with large glasses of juice on a silver platter. The servers all looked like Kaleem, ragged, malnourished and, honestly, envious of the lifestyle that their 'master' was living. He couldn't help but compare the quietly honest imam in his village with the lavishness of Imam Shahid, starkly offended by the vast difference. His imam would never be allowed to live like this, mostly because the village elders paid his housing and salary.

"Imam sahib, how long have you been the imam here?" Dawood asked.

"I established the madrassah during the conflict to help support our brothers during the cause," the Imam said, almost puffing his chest with pride like a cock. "My nephew was part of the Mujahideen and embraced *shahadat* in battle." He paused for a moment to make sure that the words sunk into both gentlemen's minds. "The brothers were so honored by the work that we did here that they built me this house and the masjid that we passed when we turned towards here."

Dawood didn't hesitate with his reply, leaning forward in his chair. "The cause? You mean Afghanistan?" The Imam nodded proudly. Dawood feigned respect. "*Masha' Allah, Subhan Allah*. Being a *shaheed* is an extraordinary honor for any man's family, as there is no higher praise of Allah than to fight for Islam."

"Yes, yes. Indeed. *Masha' Allah*." The Imam took a sip of his juice, and Dawood thought he saw a gleam in his eyes that he didn't trust. *Here it comes, he thought. The interview.* He mentally geared himself up for it. "Do you have any brothers?"

"No, sir. Unfortunately, I am my parent's only son. I have two sisters though."

"Ah. I am sorry. Are they married, in school?"

There it was again — that gleam. Dawood replied smoothly, unhesitatingly. "One is married, sir. They had schooling up until grade five, but my father felt they would be better served learning to cook and sew at home after that." He smiled, hoping it didn't look as fake as it felt. "Learning to be good wives."

"Yes, that is essential. This is a big issue in our society — the decadence and lure of the West corrupts our own pure culture, and we must fight against the bastardization of our heritage."

"Beginning with our women..."

"Our women are our mothers. They teach our sons and daughters values, and if the mother has the wrong values, then there is no hope for the children."

"Yes sir." What could he say to this? Technically, the Imam was right. Dawood looked across at Kaleem, who had been eerily quiet through all of this. Time to change the subject. "In Punjab, though, where I have worked for many years, it's not Western culture that we need to fight. It's Indian. They have absorbed their music, their movies, even their customs."

"Our enemies are on all sides, my son. With India, our battle is in Kashmir. India is

itself a victim of cultural adulteration. They are more and more clones of Western culture with each passing day.”

“But we can fight it, can’t we, Imam sahib?”

“That is what our brothers in Afghanistan are doing. They are implementing true Sharia, and it is a matter of time before we do the same here.”

“How can we bring it here?” Dawood leaned forward.

“How do you think we should?”

“Well...we need to teach our boys our values. In the madrassahs...”

“You lived in Lahore. How many parents in Lahore will send their children to a madrassah?”

Dawood had to acknowledge that. He let a hint of bitterness creep into his voice. “Yes, they would rather send them to expensive private coed schools which teach them to sing and dance, and their curriculum is vetted by the West.”

The Imam’s heavy hand slammed down on the table. The juice glasses rattled and rocked, and the Imam’s voice rose by several decibels. “They are not just vetted by the West — it’s their bloody education!” Dawood and Kaleem both jumped. The Imam looked down and breathed heavily for a second, before bringing himself under control. The severity of his reaction told Dawood plenty, though. *He has big plans, and they’re obviously not peaceful plans.*

Dawood allowed himself to be subjected to the Imam’s questions throughout lunch. They discussed everything from Palestine to Kashmir, the ineffectiveness and corruption of the Pakistani government and the secret desire of the West to eradicate Islam. That point alone, which Dawood had brought up, took up the bulk of the meal, but Dawood noticed a slight shift in the Imam’s posture, a louder laugh, and the smooth forehead no longer creased with lines. *I’m in*, he thought, turning his attention to the sumptuous feast before him. *Time to eat.*

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Dawood and Kaleem both leaned back from the table in unison, looking as satisfied as the cat who swallowed the canary. There were pieces of *naan*, chicken bones, leg of lamb and the skeleton of a trout strewn around the table as a reminder of the massive feast that had been prepared in their honor. The Imam sat at the head of the table, still picking meat from his second fish, with crumbs falling from the corner of his mouth.

Dawood’s satisfaction over his successful interrogation had waned a little bit. He’d managed to tune in to the darkness and could have sworn there was someone breathing in the shadows. It took every bit of training he had not to turn and stare. Instead, he followed Kaleem’s lead and pretended to be satiated and relaxed after the sumptuous meal.



they had just shared.

The Imam looked around at the two, realizing that they had stopped eating, and with a chuckle slid the plate away, "I guess I should stop as well." Both Dawood and Kaleem protested, encouraging him to continue eating, but as the Imam's objections grew, the two did not want to be rude, so they took a few pieces of fruit so that the Imam would not have to stop eating. *It's not like he needs the food*, Dawood thought to himself, recalling the first interaction at the Timergara bus stop. When Kaleem introduced the two of them, Dawood had to lean down to embrace him, attempting to avoid the grubbiness of his unwashed hair, not being able to reach both his arms completely around him. *A missed meal or two wouldn't do him any harm*, Dawood thought unkindly, *maybe coupled with some exercise*.

Reaching for another chicken leg, the Imam called for one of his servants, "*Atif-a, sheen chai rawra.*" As the servant turned and made his way to the kitchen, the Imam smiled, chicken meat filling the spaces between his teeth, "Green tea will help us digest the meal." The Imam took a couple more bites before shoving the entire chicken leg into his mouth and sucking all the meat from the bone. Dropping the bone on the plate, he slid it away and leaned back, rubbing his stomach. "*Al-hum-do-lillah.*"

Over lunch, the Imam had kept up a flow of stories about the people who had stayed in this house, both before and after his family moved in. From CIA and ISI officers to leaders of the Afghan resistance, the list of names was stellar. Each word increased his value, whether actual or perceived, in Dawood's mind. Imam Shahid was a high value target not only for Pakistani intelligence, but for the world community, and more importantly, was the connecting piece to getting to the leadership of the terrorist front operating in the tribal areas and urban centers.

Kaleem, with the weight of the meal in his stomach and the comfort of the air conditioning on his back, had closed his eyes a number of times, only to pop them open again. He sat rocking back and forth, as he fought his drowsiness, until finally giving up with a big yawn. "Imam sahib," Kaleem stammered, fighting back another yawn, "I think we should take some rest. This evening will have many guests in the house, as usual, and we should be at our best."

The Imam had been fighting sleep himself and Kaleem's suggestion could not have come at a better time. "*Beta*, you're right. Evenings are always very busy here with students and guests coming for my seminars." He explained himself to Dawood. "Sleep is an excellent idea."

He called to another servant, motioning him close. "Please show them to the guest rooms so that they can rest. Dawood, Kaleem, please go with the boy. He will get you settled into rooms."

As they moved to the door, Dawood noticed that the Imam was still standing in the

hall. Turning back, Dawood asked, “Imam sahib, aren’t you going to rest also?”

“I have a cot here in this room where I will take my rest,” the Imam said, turning on a light for another section of the room. Dawood glancing over and saw the “cot” that the Imam was talking about. In the corner of the room was a large queen-sized bed with a large TV setup on the wall across from it. *Hopefully our rooms have that kind of comfort.* “We will reconvene at five for afternoon tea.” Dawood felt a hand on his back guiding him out of the room, and as they stepped out, he heard the TV switch on to one of the many Islamic channels that was available via satellite in Pakistan.

A few minutes after they left the room, two figures emerged from the shadows. These men had been watching and listening to the entire exchange over lunch, gauging the participants for inclusion. They sat down at the freshly cleaned table, speaking in hushed tones about the afternoon’s show.

“Dawood seems like a worthy candidate.” Fazal said, reaching for a piece of fruit from the bowl in the center. As the commander of the Pakistani side of the resistance force, he had seen every type of man come into his indoctrination camps, where they were assessed to determine how they could best serve the cause. His own experience as a battle commander during the Afghan conflict had given him great insights into the inner workings and thought processes of the men who eagerly signed up to be part of the jihad. Most of them were just looking for a place to belong, not to be a force. A few, like the Imam’s nephew, become warriors for the cause. No one was allowed to leave alive if they decided against being part of the resistance — that would be too great of a risk. “He shared many of our views. He will be easy to incorporate.”

“*Ji, Ji,*” the Imam sat down across the table. “I’m quite impressed with Dawood’s knowledge. I think he may be useful to have around.”

Fazal’s companion picked up the remote from the table and turned on a large screen that was hidden in the darkness. “Before we induct him into the organization, what do we know about his background?”

Pictures flashed across the screen. Pictures of Dawood’s first meeting with Kaleem at the construction site, at the masjid where they prayed together and the place in the old city where they would lunch two Fridays a month. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary in any of the pictures, the companion said, continuing to flip from one to another, until he reached a series of photos that caused him to stop. “The only thing about this man is that he’s too careful in his movements. It’s almost as if he’s aware he’s being watched and is doing what is expected. But there are a few people that interact with him at a tea house that are never seen at any other place,” he said with a hint of concern. “Someone that is this careful must have something to hide.”

Fazal laughed at the comment. “Sheikh sahib, we’re all careful in everything that we do. Do we have something to hide?”

The Sheikh shot an angry look at Fazal. “Do you think that we have nothing to hide? If the intelligence services were to find out who we are, our freedom, if not our lives, would be gone forever. My question is, what does this man have to hide that he is so careful about his movements?”

Fazal’s anger simmered at the Sheikh’s comment. “Each one of us is hiding from someone or something. We were not the most honorable people before joining the cause, but Allah, in his grace and mercy, has given us a new mission to regain His favor and forgiveness for our past deeds.”

“Fazal! I know you’re not that naïve. What if he’s intelligence services?” the Sheikh shot back at Fazal. “Are you ready to sacrifice all the work that we have done because we were too rushed to consider all the possibilities?”

“He came with Kaleem. Kaleem has been with me since his madrassah days. Kaleem trusts Dawood enough to introduce us, and I trust Kaleem.” interjected the Imam, trying to defuse the situation between the two commanders. Fazal and the Sheikh exchanged a look.

“Imam sahib, Kaleem is weak,” the Sheikh said. Although the Imam had met the Sheikh many times in the past two decades, he had never had a one-on-one conversation with him. He always travelled with Fazal, never leaving his side. He kept mostly to himself and spoke only in Fazal’s presence, sometimes overruling his commander in decisions related to new recruits and missions. When he did, there would be a heated conversation between the two but in the end, the Sheikh’s recommendations would be followed. The Imam assumed that he had been a higher ranked commander in Afghanistan, or came with the blessings of the special guests, giving him the ability to dictate how the Pakistani resistance would function. “We can only use Kaleem for one thing, not for bringing in recruits,” the Sheikh continued, with a repulsive grin. “Of course, if you agree.”

The Imam was never in a position to disagree with him. He wasn’t sure of the power held by the Sheikh, so he nodded his head reluctantly. “Use him as you see fit, Sheikh sahib,” the Imam said begrudgingly. “He has been groomed all his life to be a holy warrior.”

The Sheikh’s satellite phone began to ring. Getting up from the table, he moved away from the two men before he answered. The call only took a few seconds and was filled with single word questions from the Sheikh. When he returned to the table, he was more resolute in his demeanor.

“I will observe and interact with Dawood during his stay here. I want to know more about him before I make a decision. At the end of the weekend, we will decide.”

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The evening was filled with speeches and fellowship from other members of the cause Dawood melded in effortlessly. He had spent weeks learning the philosophies and ideologies of groups like these, and could appear as passionate about their views as one of their own. In the background, the Sheikh kept a careful watch on his movements and what raised interest and passion in the young man's demeanor. *He seems too good to be true*, the Sheikh caught himself thinking many times. He noted that Dawood did everything with a measured level of caution, from how he greeted people to answering questions. It could be that he was uncomfortable in the scenario, or maybe he was trying to make sure that he didn't offend his host; either way, the Sheikh's concern was elevated by the caution.

Before the weekend came to a close, the Sheikh decided that he would put Dawood in the spotlight among the people who had begun to hold him in such high regard. Sending word to the Imam, the Sheikh requested that Dawood be asked to speak in the Saturday evening gathering. If he was going to be considered for inclusion, the Sheikh wanted to see him tested.

That evening, with all the guests assembled, the Imam stood before them preaching his ideology of hatred and violence on those who refused to accept the 'true' Islam. He urged the audience to take up arms and fight to reestablish the *Khilafat* that once existed. He turned and smiled at Dawood, motioning for him to join him. Dawood's stomach turned with unease as he rose to join the Imam at the microphone.

"My brothers," said the Imam, as Dawood joined him. "You have all met our newest friend Dawood. Now, I ask that he share his thoughts and ideas on the best way to bring Pakistan back to the fold of Islam and away from the Western *dajjals* that are trying to destroy it." The Imam stepped back from the microphone and invited Dawood to speak.

For a split second, Dawood froze, trying to understand this move. Was it the Imam that was testing him again or was it one of the other participants that had many private interactions with him? Clearing his throat, Dawood thought quickly, recalling speeches of Taliban leaders before the end of the Soviet invasion. He started slowly, but his voice grew strong as the words spilled out, almost effortlessly. He called for the violent overthrow of the government, public floggings of anyone who resisted Islamic teachings, and violent punishments for those who had partnered with the West to keep Pakistan secular. Every word out of his mouth was calculated and designed to incite anger and action from the members of the audience. He demanded that any good and true Muslim should join the fight either as a financier or as a warrior and that the army of Pakistan should be used as Allah's army to destroy the Hindu state to the east for its injustices against Muslims and Kashmir.

"It is time that the warriors of Islam carry Islam forward, just as the crusaders did; with the blade of a sword on the throats of those who resist the only true religion in the world. And we shall continue until the day that the *khilafat* is established around the world. We

can no longer limit ourselves to just the Muslim states because the infidels are not limiting themselves to their states. Our answer to their holy crusades in Palestine, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan must be violence because that is all they understand!" Dawood screamed into the microphone, bringing the audience to their feet with cheers of support and a chant of "*Allah hu Akbar!*"

At the back of the jubilant audience, the Sheikh watched Dawood as he had all weekend. Turning to Fazal and Shahid, he said, "Invite him to the Sanctuary. We'll see there how strong his heart is for revolution." He hoped he hadn't just made a huge mistake. Dawood had charisma, the charisma of a leader. How could they manipulate someone like him?

## CHAPTER 8

\*

“Why did you go off the reservation?” the visitor asked, visibly angered that Dawood would take such a risk without agency knowledge or approval.

“Once the trip was scheduled, I had hours to prepare and Kaleem was by my side the entire time,” Dawood replied, hoping to deflect some of the anger, but it was useless. This visitor had come with specific instructions from the handlers.

“Stop! Do you realize that no one knew that you were in Timergara?” the visitor seethed. Dawood opened his mouth to answer, but the visitor held up his hand, silencing him. “Your uncle thinks you should come home and I have been told to deliver that message. Are you ready to come home, Dawood?”

Dawood’s anger was starting to build as he listened to the visitor lecture him on field operations; he was thinking about the amount of intelligence that had been collected while ‘off the reservation’. Thank God he had changed the meeting place from the teahouse to a roadside café in Thakal. How would he show his face after the dressing down he was getting? But as the desk jockey continued to rant, Dawood’s anger overtook his sense.

“Don’t you see me sitting here? You act as if I’m in a hospital dying, but here I am, safe and sound!” Dawood defiantly said, doing his best to keep his voice low so that others wouldn’t hear him. “There are times when I can tell my uncle if I am planning to leave Peshawar and there are times when it’s not possible. He needs to understand that I’m not a little boy anymore.” He remembered Lt. Col. Akbar telling him, so long ago, *it’s much easier to beg forgiveness rather than ask for permission*. He didn’t think that phrase would have any impact on someone whose greatest risk in life was deciding whether to have chocolate or vanilla ice cream on a sundae.

“Timergara was a fantastic trip. I learned a great deal and met some wonderful people. Please tell my uncle that for me,” Dawood continued, controlling his anger with an effort. “And please tell him I’ll come home when I have completed my work. Not a day before.”

The visitor, furious at his authority being challenged, also managed to keep his temper in control. “So tell me then, what great adventures did you have on your trip?”

Unfazed by the darts coming his way from the visitor’s eyes, Dawood replied, “I’ve sent my uncle a letter with all the details of my trip. Tell him to check his mail.” His uncle would understand the message. Along with their intermittent reports to the ‘visitors’, field operatives utilized a number of tactics to forward information. They were careful not to disseminate their intelligence through a single channel, and kept away from technology as much as possible. ‘Check your mail’ was a cloaked reference to old-style dead drops.

As a sniper, Dawood had learned how to make himself invisible in his surroundings, but the visitor was not as adept. As Dawood leaned back in his seat, trying to bring his

temper under control, he felt a strange sense of unease, a small prickle of awareness that raised his hackles. *Was someone watching us?* Using the windows of the vehicles parked around him, Dawood surreptitiously surveyed the area. This was not as easy when sitting in the open with people surrounding him. *It could be anyone*, he thought to himself. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a man dart in and out of a small alcove to his left. He shifted his head slightly to bring him into focus.

The visitor was valiantly trying to re-establish his authority to Dawood, but Dawood was no longer listening. He pulled a handful of papers from his *kameez* pocket, rifling through them, removing pieces at random and placing them on the table. Taking one of the scraps, he scribbled, “We are being watched. Don’t react. Don’t look around,” and slid it across the table to the visitor. The visitor tried to pick it up, but Dawood crumpled it into the palm of his hand and waited for the visitor to acknowledge that he had gotten the message. Pulling a cigarette from the pack on the table, Dawood reached for the matchbox and asked the visitor, “Can you remember that?” The visitor nodded, but Dawood could see that nervousness and fear had overtaken him. He was having a ‘deer in the headlights’ moment, which irritated Dawood. *Stupid fool. Stop panicking or you’ll give us away.*

In one fluid motion, Dawood lit his cigarette and dropped the burning match along with the scrap of paper into the ashtray, watching it disintegrate with the heat. He turned his attention to the newbie before him, thinking of the best route to get him out of the area and away from any potential danger. The one thing that would compromise any field operative was when a messenger gave in to fear. They went from being an asset to a threat in a matter of seconds, sometimes leaving the operative to decide whether to burn the operation or burn the asset. Dawood’s eyes moved quickly, searching for a safe passage for the visitor.

Standing up from the table, Dawood motioned to the waiter. He was jovial and friendly, joking with him as he handed over a few hundred rupee notes to cover the tab. He started walking towards the bus stop a few yards away, talking to the visitor as they moved. A quick glance inside showed him that his shadow was also on the move.

The visitor may as well have been deaf — words came out, but nothing registered — because Dawood practically had to drag him towards the bus stop. Two buses pulled up at the stop and Dawood pushed the visitor onto one, telling the conductor to drop him in Saddar. He smiled and waved goodbye to his friend, looking like someone without a care in the world. He turned towards the second bus, but darted in between the two buses and recklessly crossed the four-lane road to another bus on the other side. As he climbed aboard, he looked across to see his shadow still standing on the other side looking for Dawood. The visitor’s bus had already moved off. With a smirk, Dawood realized that he was not working against professionals. He also wondered how long it would take the visitor to find the note he had shoved into his pocket when pushing him on the bus. *Let’s*

*hope his training kicks in at some point*, Dawood thought as his bus pulled away from the stop.

Boarding and alighting from a bus in Pakistan requires skill. Buses rarely stop moving for male passengers, so learning to get on and off of a moving vehicle takes more talent than the average person would think. As the bus neared City Towers, Dawood left his seat, an unusual luxury in public transportation, and moved to the back door. Since the bus wasn't going to stop, he had to be ready to jump out at his destination.

The conductor, a 15-year-old boy with a wad of cash in his hand, slapped the metal plate on the door a couple of times to let the driver know that he needed to slow down and bounded out of the bus, running alongside. "Sherpao, Islamia College, Hayatabad Chowrangi, Bara," he called out repeatedly to passengers standing at the stop, ushering them in the front door, as other passengers exited from the back. Dawood came off the bus with a running jump, admiring the conductor's energy. Conductors in Pakistan were like ticket scalpers outside a stadium, loud, boisterous and full of charisma, but then you had to be when competing with other conductors for passengers on the already overloaded buses. Jumping back on the bottom step, the boy hollered "*challo!*" and the bus picked up speed as it raced to its next stop down the road somewhere.

One thing that Dawood had learned in the past four months was to watch for familiar faces that got on and off buses with him. This was his only protection against potential thieves and prying eyes while undercover. After the tip-off at the café, he was watching carefully to make sure that no one was following him as he entered the shopping complex. It occurred to him that his precautions may have been all in vain if the visitor had not made it back home safely.

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Weeks after the Timergara trip, Dawood and Kaleem had had little interaction outside of work on the construction site. Dawood had saved some money and had decided to move out of the cramped room he shared with his co-workers. Fortunately, he found a man from the masjid who had a small portion available for rent above his family home. It was slightly more expensive than he was currently paying, but with his savings, he would be able to afford it. After a bit of convincing and some embellishing about the conditions that he was living in, Dawood negotiated a lower rent and moved in to his new rooms, saving him from the squalor that had been his life for the past three months.

Dawood rented it unseen, but he wasn't too concerned. *Anything would be better than this*, he thought as he packed up his belongings. They fit into a rickshaw without any problems. The portion, as the man called it, was no more than three rooms in the upstairs of his home. The bedroom was slightly smaller than the room that he had been living in previously, but the addition of a sitting room and small kitchenette made things more



comfortable. His new landlord had been kind enough to put in a small refrigerator so that he would be able to store essentials. Dawood quickly unloaded the rickshaw and set up his new home, relaxing on the new foam mattress that he had purchased on the way. He drifted off to sleep, glad to be finally away from the stench of rotting garbage.

The first week at his new home was peaceful, minus the occasional shouting match between the husband and wife who lived below him. They had been very good to him since moving in, sharing some old pots and pans, dishes and other household items that they no longer used. Dawood had become quite comfortable very quickly with the calm that came with living in a private home.

Dawood rose from the makeshift bed that the landlord had moved upstairs, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He'd been woken by a knock on his new front door. As he dropped his feet to the cold floor, he grabbed the t-shirt that had become part of his casual home attire and pulled it over his head. The stench of it reminded him that laundry needed to be done, but he was too tired, most days, to scrub the grime from his clothing himself nor could he afford to use *adhibi* to wash them for him. *The torture of daily wages*, Dawood thought to himself.

The knock came again, this time with more force than the first. It seemed that whoever was outside was getting impatient. Dawood yelled at the door, "Just a minute. I'm coming," as he turned on the hot water faucet to rinse his face. Cupping his hands, he threw water across his face a few times and looked up, catching his reflection in the mirror. He stroked his beard with both hands to push the water out before grabbing the flimsy towel to dry himself. He stood for a moment, staring at the reflection, thinking of Major Iftikhar's lessons. "The one lesson, the most important one," he would tell them, "forget who you are, become what you must. Without it, success in the intelligence world is impossible and death most probable." Become what I must, Dawood said to himself, opening the door.

On the other side of the flimsy pressboard door stood Kaleem, beaming from ear to ear. Over the past few months, Dawood had gotten to know Kaleem's pains and struggles at their rawest, but had never seen him smile out of pure happiness. Kaleem bounded through the door and hugged Dawood fiercely.

"*Mubaraksha!*" he gleefully said, like a child receiving the *eidi* he so desired. Before Dawood could say anything, Kaleem announced, "I have the money for my sister's wedding."

Dawood's eyes opened wide in shock. Weddings were expensive. *Where did he get...?* A man followed Kaleem into the apartment.

He towered over both men, having to crouch down to get through the doorway. He was easily over 6'5" and had the build of an accomplished bodybuilder. *He looks like he's never been to a barber and smells like he doesn't know that running water exists in the world*, Dawood

thought to himself, as the stranger lumbered into the room, leaving a pad of dirt with each footstep.

Kaleem introduced his friend. "This is Adnan. Imam Shahid sent him with a message for us." Dawood looked at Kaleem and then at Adnan. *You brought this gorilla to my home?* Dawood extended a hand forward to welcome him, only to find it crumpled between them as the giant embraced him, transferring that disgusting stench to Dawood. He pulled away and looked for a place to sit on the floor, but Kaleem grabbed Dawood's arm to pull him into the other room.

"Imam Shahid sent him here to invite us back to Timergara," Kaleem said. "I guess you made a good impression on everyone. Maybe he wants you to speak again." Dawood wasn't so sure. *Or maybe he wants to slaughter me and hang me in the bazaar.*

Dawood went back to Kaleem's first announcement. "You said you had all the money for your sister's wedding. How?"

"Imam Shahid has offered to pay all the expenses of the wedding," Kaleem said happily. "What a wonderful gift!"

Not wanting to burst Kaleem's bubble, Dawood replied, "*Mubaraksha! Bya dei mubaraksha!*" That's a great weight off your shoulders."

Kaleem embraced Dawood again, unable to control his happiness, before they went back to join Adnan. As a good Pathan, Dawood knew the fundamentals of hospitality in his culture and was not going to offend his friend's guest.

"Can I offer you some tea or a cold drink?" Dawood asked Adnan, but no reply came. He paused and then turned to Kaleem, "Does he speak?"

Kaleem let out a hearty laugh, shaking his head, "He doesn't understand Pashto, only Farsi." He turned to his friend and translated Dawood's question, sharing a laugh and a snide comment about the paucity of Dawood's supplies. Not letting on that he was fluent in Farsi, Dawood took note of the insult, but kept his face carefully blank. *So this is what you say about me when you think I don't understand.*

"We will have tea," Kaleem said finding a place on the floor next to Adnan.

Dawood stepped into the tiny kitchenette that adjoined the sitting room, filling a pan with water and setting it to boil on the stove. He leaned against the paper-thin wall, hoping to catch more of the conversation. The two discussed some sort of test and a place called the Sanctuary. The tea came to a boil and he turned his attention back to the matter at hand, pouring it into mugs and placing a bowl of sugar and a milk carton on the tray.

Emerging from the kitchenette, Dawood asked as he sat down, "So when do we leave for Timergara?"

"Tomorrow morning," Kaleem replied. "We will leave from the masjid after prayer."

Kaleem and Adnan stayed a while, but the conversation, necessarily limited by language constraints, was stilted, and they eventually took their leave. Dawood was frankly relieved

when they left, not offering dinner because Adnan looked like he could eat a few kilos of meat by himself. Besides, if he went on another trip to Timergara without letting anyone know, he would definitely be pulled from this assignment.

After the last 'trip off the reservation', strict protocols had been put in place. Dawood knew that he would be closely watched until they left the next morning, so he would have to work covertly if he wanted to survive. He knew nothing of the Sanctuary but knew his life would be ended if compromised.

His handlers, knowing Dawood's penchant for *chai*, had set up a small roadside *kehoka* just a few yards down from his residence. It allowed the operatives who worked at the *kehoka* to closely monitor the traffic to Dawood's residence, but they were also able to collect additional intelligence from the other drivers and *chowkidars* that worked in the neighborhood. More importantly, it gave Dawood a dead-drop location to pass information to his handler without the worry of being compromised.

Dawood waited patiently inside his home, knowing if he rushed out immediately after the visit, it would raise suspicions. He could not afford to be compromised now, especially when he was going to a new location he had never heard mentioned previously. Hours later, while returning from Isha prayer under the cover of night, he settled onto a *charpai*, ordering a small kettle of *dood paathi chai* and a cake. He sat quietly lost in his own thoughts as he dipped the cake into the tea cup, fully cognizant of the man who had been appointed to watch him. Rising twenty minutes later, he handed the waiter a crumpled wad of ten rupee notes with a hand written message inserted — Timergara tomorrow. The Sanctuary? — before crossing the road to walk the few houses down to his entry gate.

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There were no guards when they arrived at the bus stop, nor was the black Prado anywhere to be seen as they descended from the bus. *This looks more like the Timergara bus stop*, Dawood thought to himself. The three-hour drive from Peshawar had been uneventful for him, seated alone on the bus. Adnan and Kaleem sat together across the aisle. They were loudly engaged in conversation, drawing the entire bus's attention to them. It was uncommon, even this close to the Afghanistan border, to hear Farsi on a public bus.

There was no love between the two countries since the Russian invasion. Many Afghans blamed Pakistan and its military for the destruction of their country, forgetting that there was not much of a country outside of Kabul. They believed that the Pakistan Army had used Afghanistan to protect its own borders, training a mujahideen that was loyal to its paymasters and not the Afghan people. Pakistanis had accepted their role as a frontline state during the war, providing shelter and food to the refugees; today, almost eight years

after the Russian withdrawal in defeat, more than six million Afghans still lived in Pakistan, cursing it every day.

Pakistanis had also learned to hate the Afghans that lived in their country because of the values that they introduced into a largely peaceful people. With their influx came a Kalashnikov culture because of the surplus of cheap Soviet weapons from across the border. They also brought with them a teeming drug trade that filled the villages and urban cities with heroin and hashish, giving rise to drug mafias and hardcore criminals. But most damaging to the culture was the introduction of the *gilamjum*, the Afghani prostitute that was the sole wage earner for her family. These were daughters, sisters and mothers of men who refused to work because they could not earn in a month what these girls could in a matter of hours. What grated on every Pakistani was that even after the conflict was over, and their hatred for the people and country of Pakistan, the Afghans refused to return to Afghanistan for fear of the Taliban, an ultra-conservative Muslim group that enjoyed the full support of the Saudi Arabian government.

All of this was in addition to the extraordinary number of foreign fighters training on the border, and extremist mullahs that had gained acceptance among the general populace. *This is where the madrassah culture took off*, Dawood thought to himself. It was the breakdown of the government educational system that forced poor families to send their children to these religious schools that taught hatred instead of arithmetic, fundamentalism instead of reading and warfare instead of writing. *This will come back to haunt Pakistan one day*, Dawood thought to himself as the converted Suzuki pickup pulled away from the bus stop towards the Imam's home.

Close to the masjid, Adnan reached for his bag and motioned to Dawood and Kaleem to do the same. Dawood assumed that they would wait at the masjid for a vehicle to come from the Imam's house, but as soon as they disembarked, Adnan started to walk the five kilometers to the house. It is said in Pathan folklore that the sun is so hot during the months of July and August that prolonged exposure would actually cook a man's brain. It was one of the reasons that you would never find a Pathan on the streets between the hours of two and five in the evening. Kaleem looked at Dawood and shrugged before starting off after Adnan, leaving Dawood standing in front of the masjid. He considered hiring a rickshaw to make the trip to the compound, but decided instead to follow the other two on foot. His military training would be an asset here.

A standard five-kilometer hike for any soldier would be completed within three hours, with full gear on his back. For these three, it was early evening and almost four hours later that they arrived at the compound. Adnan was no worse for the walk, but with his overall appearance, how would anyone be able to tell? Kaleem was drained and soaked in sweat. While he had gotten quite used to working in the Peshawar heat on the construction site, most of that work was done under the shade of the building structure. The walk, however

was out in the open heat with nothing and nowhere to hide from the rays of the sun that baked the ground.

Dawood brought up the rear, water bottle in one hand and cigarette in the other. Sweat drenched his shirt, but he knew he could walk another five kilometers without trouble. After the previous visit, Dawood had learned to bring his own supplies with him. He hadn't known that he would need them so soon into the journey. They were directed to enter the compound from a small side gate by the guards standing at the main gate. Dawood and Kaleem were ushered into a waiting room behind the house. Adnan went straight inside the house to speak to the Imam and any other guests that may have been with him.

Kaleem quickly jumped into the makeshift shower that was in the waiting room and washed the sweat from his body. Dawood could only assume that Kaleem was afraid of offending the Imam with his disheveled appearance. He would have been glad to shower himself, but he decided against it. After making them walk five kilometers to his home, the Imam should see the state his 'guests' arrived in. Dawood's mind went back to the conversation that Kaleem and Adnan had in his home. *Was this the first part of the test? What was he trying to learn with this?*

"Aren't you going to clean up?" Kaleem was clean and refreshed. "We're going to meet the Imam. You should clean up."

"Look, I didn't make you walk five kilometers in blazing heat to get here," Dawood shot back. "If he's offended by me sweating, I can walk the five kilometers back to the masjid and go back to Peshawar. This is not how Pathans behave when they invite someone to their home."

Kaleem looked offended by his stark reply. "Please don't talk like that to Imam sahib. He probably didn't know that we had arrived," Kaleem offered as an apology for the violation of *Pukthoonwala*, a code that demanded that guests be given more comforts than the host.

"I had told Adnan that you should wait at the masjid and I would collect you after we offered our prayers in the evening." The Imam's voice boomed from the doorway of the waiting room. "I apologize if I have offended you, Dawood, but my orders were not followed."

Dawood acknowledged the apology with a slight nod, knowing that the Imam had his own motives in appeasing him. "Then Adnan should be punished for violating your orders, Imam sahib."

The Imam smiled and shook his head. "They must be allowed to make mistakes. Only then will they understand the implications of wrong decisions."

He paused for a moment to see if Dawood was going to add a rejoinder to his comment, but when none came, he said, "Please come with me. I have prepared a small tea

for you both. We can discuss this more, if you wish.”

They were led into his private *hujra*. Dawood had been in many *hujras* in his lifetime, but nothing like this one. The *hujra* for most Pathan men was a gathering place for guests and friends where they could enjoy meals, conversation and maybe a cricket match on television. The Imam obviously had other ideas about how a *hujra* should look. The large room had a beautifully tiled floor and treated wood on the walls. The furniture looked Italian and the rugs were hand-stitched Afghani *kilims*, which retailed for over Rs. 100,000 each. The Imam walked past the ornate coffee table covered with sweets and fried food, motioning for his guests to join him. As Dawood moved forward, he noticed that the number of servants was equal to the number of guests, and was not sure if they were actually security or food service. He heard the door to the *hujra* close with a slam behind him, as the guard stepped inside and took position in front of it. *I guess the Imam doesn't want to be disturbed.*

“Did you enjoy your last stay with us, Dawood?” the Imam asked, leaning back in his plush sofa seat. “All of the students were inspired by your speech and we were hoping that you might join us...” almost deliberately stopping to take a sip from his hot cup of tea before continuing, “for another gathering.”

‘Join us’ echoed in Dawood’s ears, wondering if the pause was accidental or an invitation. Thinking carefully, Dawood answered, “I very much enjoyed my stay with you Imam Sahib. The brothers made me feel so welcome that I didn’t want to leave. *Masha Allah*, it was an excellent experience.”

The Imam laughed, pleased that Dawood had left his home happy. “We are having a small gathering this weekend in Bajaur. We would like you to attend and speak again,” the Imam casually said. “There are some people that would like to meet you both, and I think that you would make a great impact on the brothers that gather to hear you speak.”

Dawood considered the proposal carefully. He knew that once he left Timergara, he was playing without a net and no one would be able to help him if things went sideways. The message he had left with ‘the visitor’ was Timergara, but Bajaur was a completely different scenario. He also knew the intelligence gathering opportunities that would be available in a gathering of jihadis and extremist organizations, as well as the introductions to key players on both sides of the border. Weighing the gains against the perceived risks took a split second, and Dawood accepted the invitation graciously. “I would be honored Imam sahib. It’s time that Pakistan was freed from the bloody hands of infidels.”

Shahid had gotten reports from watchers in Peshawar and Madyan who confirmed that Dawood was nothing more than a hard worker, with occasional interactions with family. Nothing that had been reported back to him decreased his respect and admiration of this young jihadi who would do great things for the cause. The Imam was pleased that Dawood was ready to join them.

“Excellent! We will leave after breakfast tomorrow morning. It should not take more than an hour to get where we need to be,” he said, unable to hide his smug smile. *He likes getting his way*, thought Dawood, politely sipping his tea.

“I hope that our travel there will be more comfortable than today’s outing,” Dawood said. The Imam had said and done all the right things earlier when he’d heard Dawood complain of the walk to the house. Dawood wondered if he was really as conciliatory as he appeared, and watched closely to see his reaction.

The Imam laughed, pulling the chicken leg from his mouth. “You will ride with me. I have some things to discuss with you privately. Kaleem will ride in the second vehicle with the other students.”

There was no sign of anger at the disrespect Dawood showed him. *If this was an organization following a military structure...* Dawood shook off the moment of doubt and turned to Kaleem, who was visibly upset that he had been relegated from the Imam’s private vehicle. “That would be better for Kaleem anyway since most of the students speak Farsi and I don’t. I feel out of place with them,” he said, gently reminding Kaleem that he had ignored Dawood, conversing with Adnan in Farsi, for the entire ride from Peshawar.

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Dawood had gotten out of practice since he moved. Getting up for Fajr *namaḥ* was no longer a habit and he had to force himself out of bed that morning. The Imam had said they would leave after breakfast, but Dawood wasn’t sure if breakfast would be after Fajr or later in the morning, so he made all his preparations. He took a shower, packed his bag and was waiting by the Prado when the Imam emerged from the house. The Imam laughed when he saw him standing there.

“Did you not sleep?” he commented, patting him on the shoulder.

“I was excited about the weekend, Imam sahib. I prepared my speech and slept for a few hours,” Dawood replied, trying to hide the exhaustion he felt from the hike the day before.

“*Masha’ Allah*, Dawood,” the Imam said. “Let us offer our prayers and enjoy breakfast with the other brothers at the masjid. We can all leave together from there. Kaleem was at the masjid last night so we will meet him there.”

Dawood realized that the Imam was purposely separating the two of them. *Was it to keep them from talking to each other or something more sinister?* he wondered as he stepped onto the runner and into the backseat of the hulking Prado. The Imam’s personal guards jumped onto the sides of the vehicle as it pulled out of the gate and raced toward the masjid.

Breakfast at the masjid was nothing special. The brothers had gotten *parathas*, cream and

eggs from the bazaar, preparing huge quantities of tea at the masjid itself. All the brothers were full of excitement about the weekend and shared past experiences with Dawood in rapid-fire progression.

“There is a full training range there,” one said.

“We are given AK-47s to practice on targets,” another commented.

“There are competitions between the different groups to see who has the most able fighters in hand to hand, as well as with weapons,” a third called from across the room. No matter what the weekend had in store, Dawood knew that he would have to learn to hide his skills and expertise if he wanted to make it out alive.

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The drive to Bajaur with Imam Shahid was less eventful than Dawood expected. With his ominous proclamation over tea that he wanted to discuss some private matters with him, Dawood expected to be interrogated again about his activities in Peshawar and whatever the Imam had learned from Swat. Instead, he was given an overview of the weekend’s activities and an insight into the ideology of the collective that he would be meeting. This was the first time since the conversation in his flat that he heard the name ‘The Sanctuary’.

“I am going to assume that you know how to use a weapon?” the Imam asked Dawood, expecting the standard Pathan reply.

“I have been hunting and our family keeps guns in the house for protection,” Dawood replied, assuming the question had something to do with the discussion at breakfast. “Why do you ask?”

“The Sanctuary is a testing ground as well as a meeting place. We use it to test the skills of new candidates, so I am interested in knowing how familiar you are with weapons,” the Imam explained.

“I can handle a weapon, but have never shot another human being,” Dawood replied, realizing that he would need to tone down his skills and proficiency otherwise he would have some uncomfortable questions to answer.

“Yes, shooting another human being is very different than shooting an animal,” the Imam commented casually, giving Dawood the impression that he had killed before. “But the exercises are only to determine how skilled you are currently. We provide training to those that choose to join the cause.”

“I may surprise you with my skills, Imam sahib,” Dawood commented in passing, impressing upon the Imam that he had more than a basic understanding of weaponry.

The vehicles separated once they arrived in Bajaur. The Imam’s vehicle went through the crowd of people into a compound on the side of a mountain, while the students bus



was stopped in a parking area where they were all offloaded. It was becoming more and more evident to Dawood that he and Kaleem were being separated for a specific purpose.

The Imam and Dawood were ushered into a room and told to wait. The Imam, apparently familiar with the entire setting, sat down at the small conference table and took an apple from the bowl of fruit. Dawood noticed pictures hanging on the wall and decided to see who had been there before him. As he roamed around, looking from picture to picture, he noticed faces that he had seen in the media including al-Zawahiri and Mullah Omar. The who's who of past visitors was a list of eminents from the global terrorism club. No wonder it was hugging the Afghanistan border, where no one other than the army had jurisdiction.

The door to the room flew open and two men with a number of armed bodyguards flooded in to check and clear the room. Behind them entered two men who went straight to the Imam, greeted him and welcomed him to the compound. Dawood stood to the side watching the interaction and the language switch from Pashto to Arabic. They discussed the status of preparations and on-going activities in Timergara. The subject then turned to him and Kaleem. The Imam motioned to Dawood to join them. He moved over to the group and waited for him to introduce his newest find. The Imam, out of politeness reverted to Pashto and introduced him.

"Mufti Fazal, this is the boy that I told you about," the Imam said. "His name is Dawood Islam."

"*As-salam-a-laikum*, Mufti sahib," Dawood said stretching out his hand, but the Mufti grabbed him by the shoulders and kissed both cheeks much like a native Arab would. Dawood responded in kind. "It is an honor to meet you."

"*Wa-laikum-as-salam*, Dawood," the Mufti responded as he pulled away. "Why do you feel that it is an honor to meet me?"

"I recall seeing you at the masjid during my last visit to Timergara and the students speaking with great respect of you," Dawood rambled off, hoping that his answer was enough to deflect the question.

The Mufti smiled, honored that Dawood remembered what the students had said about him. "You also made an impression on us with your words. I was honored to be present for such a passionate speech." He motioned to the man sitting at the head of the table, peeling a peach. "This is our friend, Sheikh Atif. He helps us select our new members," the Mufti said.

Dawood went over to Sheikh Atif and said, "*As-salam-a-laikum*, Sheikh Atif."

The Sheikh looked up from his peach and returned to peeling it. As an after thought, he said "*Wa-laikum-as-salam*," almost bothered by having to engage with him. Dawood looked to the Mufti and the Imam for direction, but none came. Instead, they motioned to a seat next to the Imam.

There was an eerie silence as the men sat at the table, eating fruit from the bowl. The Mufti made some small talk while the Sheikh sat silent, rarely looking up from the task he had busied himself with. *I didn't know that peeling and eating fruit was such a laborious task,* Dawood thought to himself. He kept looking over at the Sheikh as they ate. *Why the hell, he wondered, are you so familiar to me? Have we met before?*

## CHAPTER 9

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The meeting disbursed without incident, at least for Dawood as he was led out of the room, leaving the three men behind. They had questioned him in detail, trying to understand his background. For Dawood, as he walked away from the room, the face of the Sheikh haunted his thoughts. *Where did he know him from?*

Nestled in the lush valley between two mountains, The Sanctuary was a massive camp that was originally used as headquarters for mujahideen crossing into and from Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion. At any one time, there would have been over two hundred thousand fighters at the camp, but to the uninformed eye, they would have seen no one. Everything that related to the compound, from the medical facility and the housing units to the conference rooms, was built into an intricate maze of tunnels within the mountains. The only things visible were the house where the meeting was held, and what looked like a deserted training facility, cleverly disguised to look that way.

As he left the house, Dawood heard the sound of automatic weapon fire in the distance, probably from the training facility. He walked towards the sound. The training grounds were full of young men, trying to follow what he recognized as a drill instructor. To one side was a standard firing range built against the front face of the mountain and on the other side, a mockup of an urban setting for guerrilla warfare training. Letting his eye wander upwards, he caught a glimpse of what seemed to be sniper perches that were used to train long-range shooters and keep watch over the roads leading into the compound. There was very little difference between The Sanctuary and any basic training facility in the military, right down to an exercise field to test the fitness of the recruits. When he had arrived at The Sanctuary, Dawood had noticed thousands of students piling out of buses but on the grounds there seemed to be only a few hundred. *Where were the rest of them?*

Suddenly, the firing stopped and cries of ‘*Allah hu Akbar*’ erupted from the grounds. When he turned around, he saw a jeep emerging from the house with the Mufti and Sheikh standing against the roll bar. The jeep moved quickly through the facility to a tower that Dawood assumed was an observation post, while he heard the crackling of a sound system being turned on. Almost simultaneously, people started to stream down from the tunnels, down the mountains, in long endless chains, chanting along with those in the grounds. *Holy shit, how many are there?*

They all streamed down to the observation post, jockeying for positions closest to the tower. The valley filled with jihadi chants as more and more flowed down from all sides, until the ground was filled and people began to take seats on the rocks in the mountains. Dawood watched a bastardization of the Saudi flag raised above the tower, a flag that symbolized what the world knew as al-Qaeda, as the two men emerged on to the balcony

of the tower. The crowd below erupted with the chants of *Allah hu Akbar*; the Sheikh and Mufti Fazal pumped their fists in response, igniting the crowd to a fever pitch. The scene reminded Dawood of the political rallies that he had been in as a part of VVIP protection detail.

The '*As-salam-a-laikum*' from the Mufti was met with a thunderous '*Wa-laikum-as-salam*' from the thousands gathered, echoing against the mountains in waves. "My brothers, I welcome you home," the Mufti spoke in a short, measured tone, and the cheers and chants subsided. "We gather here to rejuvenate our spirits in the fellowship of brothers, warriors and true believers of Islam. You are the ones that will bring Islam back from the infidels in Muslim countries that have sold our lands to the *kafirs*. We are also honored with the presence of our brother and leader, Sheikh Atif, who has travelled from the jihad in Kashmir to be with us. Sheikh sahib, we welcome you." The Mufti continued speaking for almost a hour, covering the successes of the group in Palestine, Kashmir, Yemen, Kazakhstan, Pakistan and Afghanistan. He cited the number of infidel fighters that had been killed in the battle to win control of Muslim lands back. *He's obviously the warm-up speaker for the Sheikh*, Dawood thought.

By the time he ended his speech, the Mufti was yelling. "You must show the Sheikh that you want to hear his inspirational words from the jihadi battlefields." The crowd's chants increased in volume as the Sheikh rose from his chair and moved to the microphone, embracing the Mufti and lifting his arm as if he was a prizefighter. The crowd responded with a thunderous welcome for their warrior leader.

"*Bismillah-ur-Rehman-ur-Rahim*," the Sheikh started. He raised his arms to quiet the crowd. "*Masha' Allah. Masha' Allah*. I bring a message from your jihadi brothers that they implored upon me to deliver to you when we met. They told me that I should tell you that we are winning the war! That we are pushing the infidels from the sacred Muslim lands of Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and Iraq. That we are fighting the *kafirs* in Afghanistan, Palestine and Kashmir, but now, my brothers, it is your turn to fight for Pakistan. It is time to push the Western puppets from the seats of power. Only our Muslim brothers understand how Sharia should be implemented and these puppets will be judged first by our brothers." The crowds chanted '*Pakistan ka matlab kya?*' and '*La-illah-ha-il-Allah*,' as the Sheikh applauded from the balcony. He raised a hand again for silence.

"My brothers, I have seen the battlefields and the bodies of the *kafirs* as they lay dying. They beg for mercy. They beg for forgiveness. They are not as strong as our warriors who died with the words of the Holy Quran on their lips, knowing that Allah has forgiven them and given them mercy. They will be taken to *jannat*, while the infidel, the *kafir*, will only find a place in *jahanum*. Do not be fooled by what is shown on television, told to you on the radio or printed in the newspapers. These are all controlled by *yahoodi* agents to make you believe that the Great Satan is winning against us. The media will not tell the

truth until the *khilafat* is re-established and the *dajjal* is returned to his place in *jahanum*.” Caught up in the words, Dawood felt his own anger rise at how the West treated Pakistan, not as a partner in the community of nations, but a nation-state that was there for their bidding. In that split second, he understood how followers were converted to the cause.

From behind him, a voice asked. “What do you think?” catching Dawood by surprise. Dawood spun around to find a transformed Kaleem. On his head was a poorly wrapped black turban with a tail draped across his shoulder. Criss-crossed on his chest were fully loaded ammunition belts to match the AK-47 cradled in his arms. This Kaleem was very different than the one Dawood was accustomed to.

“What do I think about what?” Dawood asked, motioning to the get-up that Kaleem was wearing. “This or that?”

“Both,” Kaleem replied, striking a warrior pose with the rifle.

“I agree with what the Sheikh is saying. We need to free Muslims and the world from the infidels, otherwise we will be more enslaved,” he said, trying to hide the physical disgust he really felt. “I don’t think that warrior gear suits you, Kaleem. It seems a little much. The turban and Kalashnikov fit well though.”

Kaleem dropped the pose, feeling slighted by his friend’s comments. “Are you saying that I’m not a warrior? That I can’t fight in a jihad?”

“What I’m saying is that the ammunition belt is a bit much. You are definitely a warrior, my brother. We all are.”

Kaleem smiled at the comment. “We’ll see on the battlefield who’s more suited to be a warrior, Dawood. This is not my first time here.”

Dawood was confused. “The battlefield? What battlefield?” Had he missed something? Was this a precursor to an actual jihad?

Kaleem pointed at the firing range and guerrilla warfare course, missing the look of relief that swept across Dawood’s face. “You didn’t think that we were here just to listen to speeches, did you? We’re going to be tested against other fighters to see if we can be considered by the Mufti for jihad.” He shifted the gun in his hand. The weight of the Kalashnikov was beginning to take its toll, though he’d never admit it. He was irritated by Dawood’s popularity, had been for some time now. It was especially annoying that his beloved Imam was giving him such importance.

The Sheikh had wound up his speech and in the lull, a buzz rose from the crowd. Three men dressed like Kaleem emerged from behind the wall and moved the crowd in small batches to the firing ranges. Dawood stayed close to Kaleem, mentally changing gears from trained marksman to simple hunter. He had to forget his training, at least for now. *Just close your eyes and think of England.* He hid his grin at the treacherous thought.

The men barked at the group of men who were already crouched behind Kalashnikovs ordering them to fire at the iron plates forty yards away. As each fired off single shots at

the targets, missing them badly, the anger of the drill instructors grew, and the yelling and insults got more personal. After three more failed attempts, the men were roused away to the exercise yard by another group of taskmasters determined to turn them into warriors. Dawood and Kaleem's group was called forward and ordered to take up firing positions. Kaleem, still nursing his growing resentment against Dawood, took his position next to his friend. He was hoping to see him fail miserably.

Dawood aimed at the rock of the mountain behind the target, making sure only one or two of his shots hit their mark. Kaleem glanced over with a smirk, and fired off several rounds. He got several more than Dawood, and when Dawood looked over, he found Kaleem sneering at him. It bothered him. In fact, Kaleem was beginning to bother him a great deal more than he should. As they fired their next rounds, Dawood began to find his mark more often than not, while Kaleem and the others were unable to repeat the accuracy of their first attempts. They were, like the previous group, chased off the firing range to demonstrate their physical fitness.

Kaleem didn't have much luck on the exercise course either, sadly repeating the results of the five-kilometer hike from the day before. Dawood, along with the rest of the group, raced through the push-ups, sit-ups and wall climb without any real difficulty, though he pretended to be winded afterwards. They moved on to the guerrilla simulation while Kaleem finished his circuit.

By the time Kaleem arrived at the guerrilla warfare course, the rest of the group had already been waiting fifteen minutes. The drill instructors, impatient with the delay, yelled at Kaleem to hurry and get ready for deployment, as he had held up the group long enough. Kaleem, pissed at his own performance, felt his anger boil over at Dawood. He grabbed the training rifle and vest, running into the course, yelling back, "Let's see how you do here!"

Dawood stood with his group, shaking his head at Kaleem. He waited for the drill instructor to release them into the course. Instead, they were walked around to the back of the course and told to enter from there. They were also told that there were a number of 'compatriots' that were stuck inside that had to be rescued unharmed. The group entered through three alleys in groupings of two, moving slowly to make sure they were not exposed to enemy fire. This was a drill that every soldier had done during basic training, and Dawood had repeated with great accuracy in SSG training. Dawood had excelled at this during training and in live operations after.

Crossing the different layers of buildings, Dawood and his team moved through the course rescuing the compatriots that had been planted at different locations. Kaleem and his hit squad had so far been unsuccessful in finding or neutralizing any compatriots or 'enemies', even though they had crossed paths twice. Kaleem's team had already lost two fighters in the exchanges of fire on the crossings. Already in a foul mood, Kaleem had left

his wingman and was roaming the course looking for Dawood. He may not have been able to complete the mission, but he believed irrationally that taking out Dawood would make up for it.

Dawood moved with his wingman on his six, almost parallel to Kaleem. Kaleem found a compatriot and fired off two rounds, neutralizing him, but at the same time alerting all the other fighters of his position. Dawood and his wingman moved in from one side, while another team of fighters flanked the other, waiting for Kaleem to step out. Kaleem could see that he was cornered; he'd left his own wingman and was alone. He decided to make a run for safety before he was attacked and eliminated from the competition. Dropping to the ground and sliding himself through a break in the wall, he swung around behind the second team and fired off two shots, taking them out. He climbed to his feet and, using the buildings for additional cover, found a member of his team to support him. Dawood moved with his wingman around behind Kaleem without making a sound. As he moved forward, Dawood followed behind, waiting for a clean shot to take them both down. Kaleem stumbled upon another compatriot and pulled up his rifle to shoot, only to have bullets hammer into his legs and torso before he could get a shot away. Stunned, Kaleem turned to see Dawood lowering his rifle. He dropped his weapon to the ground and went running at him.

Dawood set himself for the impact, seeing Kaleem storming at him, looking for a hand-to-hand fight. Kaleem hit him at full stride, knocking him off balance, but didn't bring him down. Instead, he fell to the ground from the impact, bouncing off Dawood like a rag doll. Dawood snapped back and dropped a knee into Kaleem's back, pulling his arm around to hold him down.

"Is this the show you want the Sheikh to see? A man that can't control his anger on the battlefield?" Dawood whispered in his ear. "Calm the fuck down before they kill us both!"

Kaleem struggled for a second, recognizing the futility of his actions as Dawood's grip tightened on him. "Fine. Fine! Now get off me. This is embarrassing." Kaleem yelled at Dawood.

Dawood released his hold, climbed off of Kaleem and offered him his hand to help him up. After a brief hesitation, Kaleem accepted, and got to his feet, brushing off the dust.

"I'm not your enemy, Kaleem." Dawood kept his tone mild.

"No, of course not." But Kaleem wasn't looking at him.

They had an audience as they both emerged from the training course. The men were laughing at the ease with which Dawood took him down, but not everyone was laughing about Dawood's skills.

"We need to keep an eye on that one," the Sheikh said to the Mufti, watching the action from a distance. "He's had more formal training than we know."

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Dawood begged off from speaking to the group that evening, claiming that he had been injured in Kaleem's attack on him. He was taken for a check-up and treatment in the medical center buried inside the mountain. Dawood was surprised at the extensive facilities available at The Sanctuary. There was an operation theatre, testing and x-ray facilities inside the cave.

"Would you like to sit down?" the doctor asked, "or would you like to do this standing up?"

Dawood looked over his shoulder at the white coat and laughed, "Can they do that now?"

"The wonders of modern medicine. What we once did laying down, we can now do standing up." the doctor replied with a smile.

The doctor didn't look like the rest of the bearded, unwashed members of the camp. Standing just short of six feet, he looked like someone who took care of himself. He had short black hair, just like those who served in the army with Dawood, and wore black, wireframe glasses. Unlike the rest of the participants, he was dressed in western clothing, which seemed to be a no-no in this area of the country, which left Dawood wondering how he had gotten there. Most importantly, he had a sense of humor, something he had missed since getting to Peshawar.

"What do they call you?" the doctor asked, holding a clipboard to his chest.

"What do they call me? You mean my name? It's Dawood Islam."

"No one here has a name, Dawood," the doctor replied. "Everyone has an identity just in case..."

"Just in case?"

"When you're part of something like this, you can never be sure what might happen next," the doctor said, looking over the rim of his glasses. He paused for a minute. "They say they do it to protect the families of those who are fighting. If it's such an honor to be *Shabeed*, why are they protecting them?"

*Well, he's not a true believer in the cause.* And for some reason, he felt safe in admitting that to Dawood. *Should I push the doctor for more information; he seems to be so willing to share?* Dawood thought long about his next move, but knew it was better to let the comment slide rather than risk getting into a conversation that might be too revealing for him.

"Well, they haven't given me a new name yet, so I guess we're stuck with Dawood for now," he replied with a smile. "Do you have a name, doctor?"

"Riaz. Dr. Riaz Khan."

"Is that what they call you?" Dawood replied with a laugh.

"It's what my parents called me thirty five years ago. What seems to be the problem,



Dawood?”

“I was attacked during a training exercise. I have a pain in my side that makes it difficult to breathe.”

“Attacked? At a jihadi training camp? Who would have thought?” the doctor murmured. “Where exactly is the pain?”

Dawood pulled his *kameez* up and using his left hand, put his fingers between the fourth and fifth ribs, grimacing with the pain as his fingers pushed to find the exact spot. “I think it’s a pulled muscle. I get them on the construction site as well.”

The doctor replaced Dawood’s fingers with his own, applying pressure to the place he had identified. “So you work construction? Where?” he asked as he moved upwards from the pain to see if it extended beyond where Dawood could feel, as the grimace on Dawood’s face lessened.

“Peshawar.”

After a few seconds of massaging the area around the pain, the doctor pulled his hands back saying, “I think you might be right about the pulled muscle. I’d like to give you a muscle relaxant injection that will ease the pain for the night. I’ll also give you some medication for you to take if the pain returns.”

Motioning to the surroundings, Dawood said, “Look, no offense, but taking into account where we are, I don’t know if I’m comfortable with an injection. You could be trying to kill me.”

The doctor grimaced at the implication. “Yes, Allah’s plan for your life ends at my hands in a jihadi camp. With all the other ways that you could die here, it’s an injection from a doctor that’s going to kill you.”

Dawood realized how foolish he sounded. “I guess you’re right, Dr. Riaz. If they wanted me dead, they could just shoot me. Plus, the pain is pretty unbearable.”

The doctor went to the locked refrigerator and pulled out a small bottle, giving it a few shakes before pushing the needle into the rubber top and pulling the medication into the chamber. He came over to Dawood and pushed on his rib cage a few times to find the location of the pain again, before jabbing the needle into his flesh and emptying the chamber. “There. That should help with the pain.”

“So how long does it take for this to kick in?” Dawood asked.

“Take a deep breath.” Dawood inhaled the dust-riddled oxygen of the cave into his lungs.

“Wow, that was quick,” Dawood said, as he pulled his *kameez* back on and stood from the examination table. Moving to the door, Dawood stopped, turning around, and asked the doctor, “One question?”

The doctor looked up from the clipboard where he was writing notes; unsure of what Dawood would ask him, cautiously he said, “One question.”

“Where am I supposed to sleep?” he said with a smile, realizing that the doctor was expecting a more ominous question.

The doctor looked through the notes that he had been provided for any sign of how to answer Dawood’s question. “I only know what they tell me, and that is usually medical. There are guards that roam the tunnels who can give you that information.”

Dawood turned and started down the tunnel, looking for these guards to help him find a bed for the night. *Would they have beds in the caves or would they sleep on slabs of rock?* He pulled a cigarette from the pack in this pocket and slipped it into his mouth. He had already pulled the matchbox from his pocket when a guard came around the corner and yelled, “No smoking in the tunnels. You need to go outside.” He motioned towards another tunnel that Dawood could only assume would lead him outside. Before he could get the cigarette from his lips to ask about sleeping arrangements, the guard disappeared around another corner and out of sight.

Dawood followed, as best as he could, the directions that the guard gave him, but found it easier to use his own senses. He followed the stream of cool air to the tunnel exit. Stepping outside into the night air, Dawood finally pulled a match, striking it against the side of the box and paused to watch the flame engulf the sulfur tip, before bringing it to the tip of the cigarette and taking a deep, pain-free drag. It was his first in many hours and he instantly felt the high of the nicotine rush to his head. He had learned many years ago in Swat that the altitude made cigarettes more enjoyable, whether filled with tobacco or something more intoxicating. He had missed this sensation in the years spent down country.

Looking around the now barren camp, he saw dark holes in the mountain across the valley with faint lights highlighting the outlines of the different entrances. He wondered how a place like this could operate, much less exist, without raising any suspicions from the surrounding villages. The fact that there was a Frontier Constabulary post just two kilometers down the road made Dawood even uneasy with its existence and the loyalties of the paramilitary organization responsible for policing the tribal areas. These were all things that would be discussed when he returned to Peshawar to brief his handler, but the possibilities troubled him.

Tossing the cigarette to the ground, he stepped on it as he turned back to the tunnel entrance, only to find that he had been turned around when looking for his way out for his precious shot of nicotine. *Was it down this tunnel and to the right or down the tunnel, to the right and then right again a few tunnels further?* He decided that he would just venture in hoping to find his way, and even if he got turned around, there were guards that he was supposed to ask about sleeping arrangements. Walking down the tunnel, Dawood tried to remember the path he had originally followed to get to the medical center. Each time he thought he had the right path, he would end up turning around at a dead end. On the fifth or sixth

attempt, Dawood found himself outside a door, instead of the dead ends that he had found everywhere else. Wanting to be sure that he had the right place, he opened the door expecting to find the doctor sitting there. Instead, he found a room with crates stacked from floor to ceiling.

Stepping inside, he closed the door softly behind him. He couldn't turn on the lights or a passing guard would see and investigate. He would not be able to talk his way out of this situation. He stood quietly to make sure that no one had heard him enter the room and after a few minutes, he pulled out his matchbox to light the room for a better look.

Along one wall were crates with US Army markings and DOD codes painted on the top and sides. To his right were ready-made suicide vests without the detonation cords and detonators. On the wall behind him were more crates with flags from numerous countries unfriendly to Pakistan. *This was one of their ammunition depots*, Dawood thought to himself. The markings contradicted everything that the Mufti and Sheikh had said, but why were they here?

There were voices in the tunnel, coming closer to him. Starkly aware that he could not drop it on the ground so close to live explosives, not knowing what might be on the ground, he wet his fingers to put out the match, and ducked in behind one of the crates. The voices stopped a short distance away and hovered for a few minutes before they finally moved on, slowly softening as the distance increased. Using one of the crates to stand, he felt the lid move slightly from the weight of his body, uncovering some of the weapons inside. Looking inside, he found American-made MP5s, a weapon only legally available to armies and US forces. Neither had been in the region for many years and the weapons were brand new. A chill ran down Dawood's spine. *Whose war were the Mufti and Sheikh fighting?*

## CHAPTER 10

\*

Seven months into his deep cover assignment, Kamal's return to Islamabad was covered with a lie about a family wedding that he was required to attend in Lahore. He had returned under the cover of night in a commuter bus and travelled directly to one of the many safe houses scattered around Islamabad, where his identity could be protected. Grateful to be out of Peshawar, even for a week, he was especially thankful to be able to enjoy a proper meal and wear clean clothing, even if it was fatigues.

The past forty-eight hours had been a whirlwind of activity around the safe house, with members of the intelligence and military community arriving to speak to him. Each had their own questions, looking for holes in his reports and the actionable intelligence that had been collected. His 'visitors' were all casually dressed and no one travelled in a vehicle with military insignias, following the specific protocols that were defined and taught to every member of the intelligence services. It just looked like another day in an Islamabad neighborhood to the random passerby.

He stood in front of the mirror, checking each crease and pin on his uniform. Something felt out of place to him, but his mind had grown accustomed to the simple *shalwar kameez* that he wore daily for so long, making him unable to see any inconsistencies. He heard the blaring of a car horn at the gate and the familiar sound of it being unlocked and pulled open. With the roar of the engine in the garage, he knew it was time to go. Grabbing his effects from the dressing table, he snatched his cap from the bed and slipped it into his belt, making his way through the house. At the door to the garage, he stopped for a split second, taking a deep breath to settle himself before emerging into the protective shade of the garage.

This was his first time outside the house since his arrival in the city. He noticed that the garage had been fitted with a weather-sheet that blocked the view to outsiders; no one could tell who was entering and exiting the vehicles in the garage. As he emerged from the house, the soldier snapped to attention alongside the already opened car door, waiting for him to climb in to the black Corolla. The door closed with a thud behind him and the soldier climbed into the driver's seat. He noticed that the windows were a deep shade of black, blocking out any prying eyes. *Normal security or excessively paranoid?* he wondered to himself, as the vehicle lurched into reverse and pulled out of the driveway.

The driver looked into the rearview mirror, trying to reconcile the pictures he had been shown with the man who sat in his back seat now. He didn't know it, but the man in the back seat had worked as a detail driver for a colonel during his early days in the military and knew that the bond between a driver and the protectee was temporary, but if anything were to happen to the protectee, the career of the other would be ruined. Today, he sat in

the position of the protectee, wondering what might be going through the driver's mind as he looked into the rearview mirror.

"*As-salam-a-laikum* sir."

"*Wa-laikum-as-salam*. What's your name soldier?"

"Sir, I am Owais Ghani from the Rawalpindi battalion."

"Let's get going, Owais. There are people waiting at headquarters for me."

He watched out his window as the houses slowly passed and they reached the corner. The car made the turn towards F-10 Markaz and picked up two escort vehicles that matched his in make, model and color. He noticed, as they crossed the others, that even the number plates were the same. *Counter surveillance* — he was amused at the thought that he warranted such tactics. The escort vehicles stayed close behind through the first two traffic lights, splitting in different directions at the third. The driver looked in his mirror and made a cursory check for any vehicle that might be following. Seeing none, he accelerated to a cruising speed.

"Are we clear, soldier?"

"Yes, sir. It's smooth sailing to headquarters from here."

"What's our ETA?"

"Sir, we're ten minutes out."

"Make it five," he called from the backseat, and he felt a sudden acceleration in speed as the soldier complied.

"Yes sir."

Minutes later the car crossed into the red zone, the highly secure area in front of Parliament house, and raced down Constitution Avenue. He had only been there once before, traveling via military transport then as well, so he had no idea where the driver was going. After a series of turns, the car drove past a private hospital and pulled through an already open gate where armed soldiers stood guard. There was no security stop for his vehicle, obviously recognized as one of their own, nor any protocol once it entered the grounds. Just another vehicle entering what looked like a private university's grounds. The driver drove past the entrance to the building, instead making a sharp turn into the middle of the building into a secluded alleyway, screeching to a stop at a black metal door. He felt his body lurch forward with the impact of the brakes, followed quickly by a "Sorry sir," from the driver as he exited the vehicle. He tried to open the door and exit, but the doors were locked from the passenger side and he could do nothing but wait for the soldier to open them. With a rhythmic knock on the metal, the soldier alerted whoever might be sitting on the other side that he had arrived with the package, and the metal doors swung open, almost clipping the side panel of the car in the process. The soldier reached down and pulled the car door open, revealing a fully encased security wall that would protect his exit from the vehicle into the tunnel that would take him back into the main building.

His foot touched the ground and for the first time since arriving, he felt fresh air flood into his lungs. He had been living like a caged animal in the safe house, unable to emerge due to potential security concerns. He stood for a moment taking in the surroundings and offending aromas that the alleyway offered up. *This can't be where command is escorted in*, he thought to himself. It must be for prisoners and operatives. The soldiers who had been standing guard inside the metal door snapped a salute to the uniform, the gold bars on his collar and shoulder. They didn't know who he was, nor did it matter in any military. Individuals were only known by soldiers under their command, rank was recognized across the military. Twenty yards forward sat a security officer that would clear his entrance into the building, who also snapped to attention as he approached.

"Welcome sir," he said. "I need you to confirm your name and identification."

"Daw...Captain Kamal Khan," he quickly corrected himself, dropping his military identification on the table. *Kamal. Your fucking name is Kamal.* He had gotten so accustomed to introducing himself with his cover identity that he seemed to forget the name stitched on the front breast of his uniform.

The guard glanced between his identification and the man standing in front of him a few times, drawing a confused look to his face.

"Is there a problem soldier?"

"Sir, your identification picture..." the confused security officer said hesitantly, trying not to offend the officer more senior to him.

"People's appearances change. That doesn't mean that they're not the same people," Kamal quickly said, slightly offended that he had been asked. *Just how does a green soldier like this get posted to security detail?* "Command is expecting me for a briefing."

The security officer pulled a clipboard from the drawer of his desk and found Kamal's name on the list of visitors for the day. Sliding the clipboard and pen to him for signature, he returned Kamal's identification, apologizing for his mistake. Kamal couldn't blame him. He had changed significantly since the picture in his military identification had been taken. *My own mother wouldn't even recognize me like this*, he thought to himself.

The elevator door opened on to the fourth floor and Kamal was met by two soldiers in full dress uniform. As before, they both saluted him, and ushered him forward, "Please follow us sir."

This was the unified command of military intelligence with the Directors General of ISI, Army, Navy and Air Force Intelligence offices located on this level. Intermingled with these offices were a series of unmarked doors that Kamal assumed were either meeting rooms for the respective DGs or offices of administrative staff. On the walls between the beautiful oak doors were photographs of the various men who had held these positions in the past, all leading to the double oak doors at the end of the hall. The hallway was eerily quiet; no noise escaped from behind the closed doors and his footsteps were absorbed by

the plush carpeting. His two escorts reached the doors at the end of the hall and opened them to reveal an ornate conference room. Kamal spotted the row of generals sitting on one side of the table and snapped a salute, waiting for permission to enter and take a seat. A tiny bead of sweat trickled down the back of his neck as he took in the faces of the men that he was to brief. It was a who's who of the Pakistan Army's top command.

The conference room held a rich history for every Director General, hosting the few Prime Ministers who had dared to venture down the halls of the Directorate of Inter Services Intelligence. This was not a friendly place for politicians and the military men that were stationed here took pains to ensure that they understood that fact. The ISI had always come under fire from democratic governments wanting to reel them in and control their activities, but the Army command refused to allow it to happen. This room, adjacent to the Director General's office, was his own conference room and designed to be as intimidating to the elected politicians as the Prime Minister's office was to regular citizens. It was also the Chief of Army Staff's office when he visited the facility, the base of operations in Islamabad. Kamal thought about the first time he had visited ISI headquarters years ago, for a briefing with Colonel Akbar before being stationed in Karachi. That briefing room was a simple classroom on the second floor, miniature compared to where he was today.

"Take a seat, Captain," Lt. General Misbah Qadir said, "I hope your welcome back to civilization has been comfortable."

"Yes sir, very comfortable," Kamal replied. "Thank you sir."

"Captain, we have a great deal to cover today so I don't want to waste time. Do you know all the people sitting around the table?" motioning to the five men that would debrief him.

"Yes sir. I am familiar with each," Kamal lied, having only recognized three of the five.

"Then, let me get everyone up to speed," the Lt. General said, opening a file in front of him. "Gentlemen, approximately seven months ago, Captain Kamal Khan was tasked with an intelligence gathering exercise to infiltrate a jihadi network based in Sarhad. The purpose of the exercise was to gather information on the main players, sources of funding and activities of the network to assess the potential threat to the state of Pakistan." He turned back to Kamal. "You joined the network through a masjid in Timergara, Dir, correct?" he asked flipping pages of the file.

"Yes sir. I was recruited through Imam Shahid's masjid in Timergara."

The General pulled his spectacles down from his eyes, looking at Kamal. "Recruited? How did that happen?"

"Sir, I was stationed in Peshawar under the identity of Dawood Islam as a construction worker on daily wages. At the site, I met a...potential asset known as Kaleem Aslam, who engineered my introduction to Imam Shahid," Kamal explained. "I can't say whether I was

specifically targeted for recruitment, but the group seemed to know a great deal about me when I first met the Imam. I have detailed all of my interactions with Kaleem in my reports, sir.”

“Thank you for the clarification, Captain,” the General said, somewhat angered that his assistant had not highlighted that in his file. “Gentlemen, as the Captain has told us, he had provided regular reports through all channels. These reports are the basis of the debriefing today. We are gathered to determine what intelligence is actionable; what, if any, action should be taken by the army itself, and when.” He paused for a moment before asking the group of five, “Are we all clear?”

The General waited for all the men at the table to acknowledge. “Captain, the floor is yours. Please take us through the intelligence.”

Kamal rose from his seat and moved to the video screen against the front of the room. He picked up the remote for the projector, flipping through photographs to where the whole story started. He had spent the past two days putting together the presentation that he was about to deliver, but as he stood there, the nervousness of his first briefing caught in his throat, and he paused to grab a glass of water to settle his nerves. He spent the better part of three hours walking the generals through the seven months of being Dawood Islam, the people that he had met and the places that he had been to. He knew that these men wanted to know the five W’s so that they could make an informed decision about what the army’s response should be to this potential threat.

Kamal stopped when he reached the slides about The Sanctuary. There were none. So he described the location as well as he could, since he hadn’t been able to take any pictures without compromising his cover. He pulled up maps of the area and used a white board to define the location and layout of the compound and the proximity of law enforcement agencies to it. As he returned to the slides, he introduced and discussed both Mufti Fazal and Sheikh Atif in greater detail, pointing out that he felt he had seen the Sheikh somewhere previously, but was unable to place where. The last slides of the presentation were of the crates of weapons, taken with the minute light of a match, making them harder to decipher, but clear enough to get the urgency of the message across. “This is not just a jihadi organization, and probably not affiliated with the mujahideen in Afghanistan. They are planning something much more ominous for Pakistan,” Kamal said as he flipped the projector off.

“How do you think something like this can exist for so long, Captain?” asked Lt. General Asim Junejo, Director General, Military Operations. “You would think that the Frontier Constabulary would have neutralized this by now.”

“Sir, I would have thought so myself, but the realities on ground are significantly different. I am not commenting on the FC command, but from my investigations, I’ve discovered that the line soldiers are more interested in protecting notables than policing



the region,” Kamal answered, making sure not to overstep his boundaries. “I don’t think, sir, that the FC is willing or able to neutralize this compound. I also don’t believe that they are operating independently. They have some major support and international donors to be able to feed, train and arm this many jihadi fighters.”

“Captain, are you suggesting that the army needs to step in?” asked Brigadier Ahmed Saeed, Director General Military Intelligence.

“Sir, I am in no position to suggest anything to the army. My job is to gather intelligence and report back to my handler for informed decision-making,” Kamal answered. “The army does what our command decide.”

The questions continued. How did the compound operate? What were its defenses like? If it needed to be neutralized, how it could be done, quickly and efficiently? There were many questions about the potential weaponry that might be stored at the compound that Kamal may not have seen, but Kamal had spent two nights hunting around the compound to get as complete an intelligence picture that he could. “They had Kalashnikovs, sir, which makes me think they have a store of old Soviet armaments. I am sure that they have the necessary weaponry to defend themselves against air attacks, but there was no indication of where those may have been stationed while I was at the compound.”

The discussions continued into the late evening hours before the Director General adjourned, requesting that all parties reconvene tomorrow to continue. Kamal was asked to leave the room so that the five could have a private discussion, but the Director General sent his aide to ask Kamal to stay behind for a conversation once everyone had left.

“Just a question, if you don’t mind.” Outside, Kamal stopped the aide before he opened the door to re-enter the conference room. He had been watching the Generals lighting up throughout the presentation and discussion, but didn’t think it was proper protocol to light a cigarette himself. “I’ve been here a few hours and would like to have a cigarette. Is there somewhere on this floor where I can smoke?”

The aide grinned. “Why didn’t you just smoke in the conference room? The Generals wouldn’t have said anything.”

“First time here, I didn’t want to offend anyone,” Kamal replied wryly. If he had known...

“There’s a room three doors down that you can duck into for a cigarette. Why don’t you just stay there and I’ll collect you?” the aide replied, as he opened the door and ducked inside.

With his nicotine addiction taking hold, Kamal moved quickly down the hall to the third door and popped it open, walking in without a second thought. He stopped. A young woman sat at a desk, furiously typing away on her laptop. She lifted her head to see him standing there. With a scowl she said, “Is knocking no longer part of military training

soldier?”

Kamal was taken aback, first with the woman sitting in the office and then by her tone. “Excuse me, ma’am. I was told by the aide that I could smoke here. I was only following the directions that I had been given. Apologies, I must have the wrong room.”

“Well you obviously can’t smoke here,” the lady replied abruptly. “You can go downstairs to the fresh air and pollute it with your cigarette smoke, along with the rest of the rank and file.”

Kamal, offended that she grouped him in with the rank and file, stepped into the room and walked straight to the her desk. “It’s Captain, not soldier. Soldiers are the ones who stand with rifles on your gate. I’ve earned my stripes already,” he said pointing to the captain’s bars on his collar.

“So sorry,” she mocked. “*Captain*. You still can’t smoke in here. This is my office and I don’t know what idiot aide would send you here for a cigarette.”

From his pack, he pulled a cigarette and lighter. Placing the cigarette in his mouth, he flicked the lighter and watched the flame emerge.

“I wouldn’t light that,” she warned him.

Kamal pulled the lighter closer and lit the cigarette, taking a long satisfying drag before exhaling into the air around her. “I would like to go downstairs for a cigarette in the fresh air, but since I can’t leave this floor, I’ll just have to deal with your freshness,” he said with a smile.

The lady picked up her phone and dialed quickly. “Security, I have a soldier in my office who is smoking. Please come and remove him.”

A security team for headquarters was stationed on every floor and within seconds of the call, two men burst into the room, only to freeze in their tracks when they saw Kamal. Every member of the security team had been alerted that there was a field agent in the building along with his location to avert any incidents. The security officers glanced between Kamal and the young lady, trying to decide which one to appease, finally settling on Kamal.

“Ma’am, you’ll need to excuse the Captain. He’s not allowed to leave the floor under the orders of the Director General,” one security officer said.

“So my office becomes his smoking room?” she retorted angrily.

Unable to resist, Kamal grinned at her. “My waiting room as well. The aide told me to wait here to be collected.”

She was furious. Kamal could see her temper rise with each word the soldier said. But she controlled herself admirably, ignoring Kamal and taking her anger out on the poor soldiers. “Get out! I’ll take this up with your commander!” she yelled.

Kamal strolled to the sofa next to the door, and calmly sat down. “Bring me an ashtray, double time!” Kamal ordered the soldiers. A soldier returned seconds later with the

ashtray, causing Kamal to grin ever harder. "This is a military building ma'am. I'm sure it would be different if this were a civilian one. Fortunately, here the uniforms have a bit more clout. This is very comfortable, by the way. Where did you get it?" Kamal asked. "I'd like one for my flat."

"Do you know that each puff you take off that stick decreases your life by two minutes? Are you willing to make that sacrifice for a little smoke?" she said, without answering the question.

Kamal grinned, running his hand over his beard. "If you knew what I do for a living this sacrifice is the least of my worries," he said waving his cigarette above the ashtray, careful not to drop any ash on the sofa or floor.

She gave him a withering look and a parody of a smile. "Do you regularly push your way into other people's offices?"

"Well, I'm normally out in the field protecting your freedom and your frontiers, so, no. I don't make it a habit." Kamal answered, getting up from the sofa to look around the office.

"Excuse me, but what do you think you're doing?" she asked.

"Well, I like your taste in furniture, so I thought I'd check out the art and see if we match there as well," Kamal said, turning towards the painting on the wall. "This is a Sadequain, right? Excellent! I have always wanted one of these."

"You know Sadequain?" she said with surprise.

"I know. A *soldier* that knows art, how could it be possible?"

"No, that's not what I meant..." she started.

"So what did you mean Sara?" Kamal asked her.

She fell silent, stunned that he knew her name. "Do I know you?" she looked at him suspiciously.

"Actually...no," Kamal answered. "We've never met."

"Then how do you know my name?"

"Intelligence services. We know everyone's name. Well, that's what you civilians think anyway." He saw the incredulous look on her face and relented. Even with a beard, Kamal was charming when he tried. "You have three pieces of paper on your desk with your name on them. It's pretty easy to figure out who you are from there."

She looked down and saw the confidential memo, airline ticket and visiting card sitting in full view. Futilely, she swept them off the table and into a drawer.

"That doesn't do any good after they've been seen, Sara," Kamal mocked. "You should have done that as soon as I came in the room. Or maybe you wanted me to know your name?"

"Why would I want you to know my name? I just met you and I'm not really impressed with you so far."

“Now, that’s a lie. See how your voice went up and you looked to the left. That tells me you aren’t being completely truthful,” Kamal was enjoying himself. It had been a long time since his last interaction with an intelligent, educated woman. “Had your voice stayed at the same pitch and your eyes not moved, I might have bought it.”

Sara blushed at his comment. She had checked him out when he came in the office, but thought that she had hidden it better.

“Wow, you really do like me.” Kamal said. “I completely threw you a line with the lying, but that says that I was dead right with my observation,” pointing out the red in her cheeks.

Before Sara could answer, there was a knock at the door. The aide popped his head inside. “Sir, I’ve spent the last ten minutes looking for you. Security told me where to find you.”

“Havildar, you told me the third door down. That is where I came.”

“Sir, I did tell you third door down. This is the fourth,” the aide answered with a smile. “Good evening, Miss Ahmed.”

“Good evening, havildar. Can you take this man out of my office?”

Kamal moved towards the door, turning back with a smile. “Thank you for the entertainment, Sara. Apologies for any misunderstanding.”

“Just leave, Captain.”

Kamal paused at the door for a moment and just before he closed it, said “I’m sure you have more questions and insults for me, but would you prefer that I call you on your office line or mobile for dinner later this week?”

“I wouldn’t be interested, so don’t bother,” she said.

“See there it is again, the voice pitch and look away,” Kamal said. “I’ll call your mobile to set the time and place. Good evening, Miss Ahmed,” he said, closing the door behind him.

It may have been a long time since he had been in ‘civilization’, but he hadn’t forgotten how to flirt with a woman. He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and dialed the number from Sara’s visiting card. The phone rang twice and she picked up.

“I wanted you to have my number in case you want to call me,” Kamal quietly said. “Please do save my number. It’s Kamal Khan.”

“No Captain anymore?” she asked.

“Just Kamal for you,” he said as he hung up and walked into the conference room.

## CHAPTER 11

\*

The last few days in Islamabad were a whirlwind for Kamal. He made excuses to see Sara and spent his nights talking to her on the phone. Three days of using all his energy just to spend time with her in the controlled environments where he was allowed to be. He learned about her, telling her half-truths about himself. He could not let her in while he was still under cover, but maybe after, he kept telling himself, rationalizing his half-truths. She seemed very different from the young lady he had first encountered. The whole time he listened to her, he tried to reconcile every half-truth from his mouth with a simple “become what you must,” believing that everything could be fixed once his mission was over. Major Iftikhar’s words haunted him even outside the mission. Had he forgotten who he was?

He returned to Peshawar with gifts for his friends. Any respectable Pakistani wedding would yield two things for the brother of the bride, *mithai* and money. He was returning with both, but only the *mithai* was for his friends. His cover had to stay intact for the mission to continue. He hadn’t told anyone that he had a sister, but that wasn’t uncommon among working class Pathans. Family relations were kept quiet, even from the closest of friends. Dawood would just have to hope that held true now, since his background was not from a working class Pathan family.

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Two hundred kilometers away, in the conference room at headquarters, the gang of five had gathered to discuss the intelligence that had been presented and discussed ad nauseam with their deep cover operative. The conversation had ended in a deadlock, each side trying to impose the validity of their position on the others. These men had been together, moving up the ranks of the army command, since Staff College Quetta. Each knew where the other’s bodies were buried, enhancing the trust between them. But Lt. General Qadir knew a little bit more than he let on. He called it his ‘emergency package’.

Hours later, Lt. General Junejo swirled his whiskey, making the ice clink as it rolled around the glass. He loved watching old British comedies, a habit formed while he was at Sandhurst. As his family lay sleeping on the second floor of his colossal home, he indulged himself with a few episodes of Black Adder, one of his personal favorites. It had been a long, tiring day of meetings and arguments; he needed to relax before he tried to sleep for the night. The whiskey, he hoped, would help with that mission. He was still struggling with the events of the past week. He couldn’t understand why his colleagues would consider such a volatile action on the basis of one intelligence operative’s information. *It*

*was the fuse that would light the dynamite, bringing war to Pakistan.* He was lost in thought when his phone began to ring from across the room. He glanced down at his Rolex. Junejo couldn't understand who would be calling him so late. Pushing himself off the plush leather sofa in front of the television, he stumbled across the room to silence the disturbance.

"Hello?" he said, only hearing silence on the other side. "Hello. Who is this?"

"Let's not worry about names, General. Let's talk about responsibilities."

The General, even in his semi-drunken state, recognized the voice.

"I hope you're standing strong against the proposed action," the voice said

"It will never happen on my watch," Junejo replied, trying to shake the cobwebs from his inebriated mind. "Your orders are being followed."

"My orders?" the voice said laughing. "I think you have misunderstood. This is about...what do they call it...a convergence of interests."

"Interests?" Junejo replied, confused. "What do you mean interests?"

"Why such a foolish question, General?" the voice replied, anger slipping into his tone. "Do you really think that you would do this if we were not taking your interests into account?"

"I haven't shared any interests with you," Junejo replied harshly.

"Ah, but you have," the voice replied. "We shared our interest in having our friends in Bajaur protected and you shared your interest that your family be left unharmed. You see, a convergence of interests."

Before Junejo could answer, the line went dead.

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"Dawood *bhai!*" Kaleem yelled from across the construction site, dropping the wheelbarrow of bricks as he ran over to his friend. "*Pa khair raglay!*" he said, throwing his arms around him in an embrace. "*Mubaraksha!*" Kaleem released his friend. "How was the wedding?"

"*Khair Mubarak,* Kaleem," Dawood replied. "The wedding was excellent. I've brought sweets for everyone. It's nice to be home after the heat of Lahore." Reaching into his shopping bag, he took out a box of Lahori *burfi* for his friend and brother.

Opening the box, Kaleem quickly shoved a sweet into his mouth. Trying to catch the crumbs as they fell from the corners of his mouth, Kaleem said, "How did you know *burfi* was my favorite, brother?" as he reached into the box again.

"When you go to Lahore, is there really any other sweet to bring back for friends? It's their specialty," Dawood replied with a small smile, as other members of the construction crew gathered around him clamoring for a box of sweets for themselves. Passing out the

boxes, the recipients each smiled and congratulated Dawood on the wedding. The bag quickly emptied and Dawood folded it into a small square, shoving it into his *kameez* pocket. Shopping bags were always reusable as trash bags and suitcases. Kaleem took his hand and led him to the roaming *chai* vendor, wanting to talk more about the past week in Peshawar and get details of the wedding in Lahore.

“Dawood *bhai*, you have missed so much,” Kaleem said with a smile. “Adnan came to visit twice and was asking where you were. I told him that you were at a wedding in Lahore.”

“Why did Adnan come to visit? Is there another training that we must attend?” Dawood asked.

“No, no. He just wanted to know if we needed anything,” Kaleem replied. “The Imam sent him to deliver supplies for us. I have your flour, sugar and tea at my home. I’ll drop them at your flat in the evening when I have the taxi.”

“*Masha’ Allah!* That is so kind of Imam sahib. You’re still driving the taxi?” Dawood asked surprised. “I thought you would have stopped now that you don’t have to worry about your sister’s wedding.”

“Oh *bhai*...the taxi provides income beyond what I earn here. I would also like to live in a place of my own like you one day,” Kaleem replied. “Plus, I spend the evening traveling around the city at someone else’s expense.”

The two quickly finished their tea as the building owner arrived on site to check the progress. Dawood had built a close friendship with Kaleem, but the alliance with the Imam was causing concern for him. Could he be sure that Kaleem was not passing information back to the Imam on his every action? Dawood shook off the thought as he returned to hard labor after his week of comfort, knowing that his body would ache in the evening.

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“He wasn’t there,” Adnan told them with caution in his voice.

They had their concerns after the performance on the training course, but the concerns were heightened with Adnan’s news that Dawood was nowhere to be found.

“Why does a Swati boy travel to Lahore for a family wedding?” the Mufti asked the Imam. “Would he not come to Swat?”

The Imam was also perplexed at the sudden disappearance of his star recruit. He had sent his men to Madyan after the first meeting and each had returned with a positive report that Dawood belonged to the village, some even knew him from his school days.

“I can’t explain why he would do that,” the Imam replied. “If it was truly a family wedding, he should have come to Swat. Let me send my men to inquire of the villagers.

We will know the truth.” The Sheikh shook his head in disagreement.

“Adnan, did *you* speak with Kaleem?” the Mufti asked.

“Kaleem was at the construction site as expected,” Adnan confirmed. “I spent two days in his flat waiting for Dawood to return.”

“Bring me the FC Commander,” the Sheikh said. “He may have some useful information.”

Adnan turned on his heel and rushed out of the room, while the three continued their discussion. The FC Commander in Bajaur was a loyalist to the Mufti, well taken care of with money and arms for his service. The Commander had also been great assistance in eliminating those who spoke up against the camp in the surrounding areas, for an extra fee, of course. What the Sheikh was going to demand this time would require more than a small donation to the ‘FC Fund’, as it was known.

“Something is not right, Imam sahib,” the Sheikh said, rising up from his seat at the head of the table. “For a new recruit to be able to perform so...so...effortlessly...fluidly, doing something that he has not done before. It’s just not right.”

The Imam, alarmed at the implication, jumped to Kaleem’s defense. “I have known Kaleem since he was a boy. He studied at my madrassah after his father disappeared. He would not turn on us, Sheikh sahib.”

From behind the Imam, the Sheikh put both his hands on his shoulders. “No one has said anything about your precious Kaleem, Imam sahib.” He pulled out the chair next to him and sat down, keeping a light grip on the Imam’s shoulders. “Or, maybe you have some doubts about your protégé, something that makes you jump to his defense so quickly.”

A bead of sweat trickled down the Imam’s forehead, who was suddenly feeling as if the temperature in the air conditioned room had dramatically increased. He wanted to look away, but feared that may create doubt about his own allegiance with the Sheikh. “Kaleem is like a son to me. I have watched him grow from a boy to a man. I don’t doubt him.”

“Would you give your life for him?” the Sheikh asked, tightening his grip on the Imam’s shoulder. He watched as the Imam cringed from the pain of his grip. “Would you die for him?”

The Imam was confused and frightened. He knew the Sheikh’s reputation for blood when people violated his trust, and feared that either response would have fatal consequences for himself and Kaleem. He struggled to push his arms up, breaking the Sheikh’s hold as he said firmly, “My life is my own. Let Kaleem speak for himself.”

A crooked grin crossed the Sheikh’s face, knowing the vociferous defense provided by the Imam was limited to words, not actions. “Imam sahib, how do you forsake someone you consider a son so easily?”

“Allah has not blessed me with sons,” the Imam replied, cold and emotionless. “I only



have brothers in arms. My brothers' safety is more important than any single life, even my own."

The Sheikh stood, glancing at the Mufti across the table. They had never dealt with a situation like this before. People were either with the cause or against it. There was no middle ground in their eyes. Pretenders who had tried to enter the cause were eliminated before reaching The Sanctuary. Dawood's performance had only been witnessed by the Mufti and the Sheikh, so the Imam was unaware of why this whole conversation was happening. Kaleem introduced Dawood to the organization. Could one, if not two, pretenders have infiltrated them?

As the Sheikh returned to his seat, the door opened and the FC Commander was ushered into the room. Faheem Khan had been the Post Commander in Bajaur for over four years and kept his position by the decree of the Political Agent, who was always compensated for his signature, and the Inspector General in Peshawar. Originally from Khyber Agency, Commander Faheem Khan had gained his posting through a political recommendation from Ijaz Afridi, known to never refuse the 'Quaid' for unsavory tasks. Faheem had been one of his regional enforcers, who was promoted once Afridi was elected to the National Assembly. He had continued his enforcer behavior throughout the length of his posting, drawing the attention and praise of both Mufti Fazal and Sheikh Atif regularly.

"Commander sahib! Welcome!" the Mufti rose to embrace one of his closest allies. "How are things in the village?"

The Commander released the Mufti and shook the Imam's hand, before kneeling to kiss the outstretched hand of the Sheikh. "*Salaam-a-laikum*, Sheikh sahib." The Sheikh nodded his acknowledgement of the respect paid, as the Mufti invited him to sit.

"Bring our friend a cup of *dood paathi chai* and some *pakor*as," the Mufti said to Adnan, the obedient servant, who turned at the door, pulling it closed behind him. The Mufti waited a minute, making sure no one was coming back, before turning his attention back to Faheem.

"Did you get the 'gift'?" the Mufti asked with a smile. "He had been asking a lot of questions around the village about you, so we felt it best that he speak to you directly about his concerns."

"I had an excellent conversation with the journalist. It was just too bad that the army came and took him away from me," the Commander winked and smiled, as he massaged his fist. "May Allah protect him from what those animals will do," he snidely said.

The Mufti and Sheikh both laughed, knowing that the journalist would never be seen again. "Commander sahib, we have a favor that we must ask of you, but it will require you stepping outside Bajaur," the Sheikh said.

"Sheikh sahib, I am always honored when you call upon me for favors," Faheem said.

“You have been so kind to me during my posting here, I only look for ways to repay your hospitality.”

“Of course, Commander sahib, and we will be rewarding you with many *duas* for this life and the next,” the Sheikh continued. “We have a couple of problems in Peshawar that need to be controlled. One problem can be easily solved, but the other will be more difficult.”

The Sheikh paused as someone knocked on the door. “Come,” called the Mufti. Adnan’s massive frame filled the room, as he entered with a tray of teacups. Behind him were two additional servants carrying trays filled with *pakor*as, biscuits and cakes for the guests. They quickly laid the table and exited the room as the men waited to continue.

“Faheem sahib, please,” the Mufti invited his guest to partake in the feast. Faheem took a plate, filling it with *pakor*as and a slice of cake. The Sheikh waited patiently for Faheem to sit down before continuing.

“Imam sahib, the file?” The Sheikh waited as the Imam handed Faheem the compilation of information on both targets. Faheem flipped through the dossier, laying the contents out on the table in front of him. He rifled through the papers and picked up the pictures to examine them closely, leaving oily fingerprints on each.

The Sheikh watched the barbarian impassively. “Commander, do we have the right man for the job or shall we look elsewhere?” Whatever he thought of the man personally, the Sheikh needed a brute for this job.

Faheem looked at the Mufti, then the Sheikh, smiling. “You have your man.”

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The sun broke over Margalla Hills and the *azqaan* filled the fresh morning air. It looked like another beautiful day in Islamabad. At the Junejo household, Ayesha had finished her Fajr prayers and was happily bouncing down the stairs. The house was filled with the sweet aroma of freshly made *halwa* as the maid prepared breakfast for the family. Her brother Tariq stumbled down the stairs, still rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“Nouman! Nouman!” Tariq shouted for the houseboy. Nouman came racing around the corner. “Polish, Nouman. You must *polish* my shoes,” he said. “Hurry, we need to leave soon.” Nouman took the shoes and raced back out the door. Tariq turned to find his sister seated at the table stuffing her face with mouthfuls of *halwa*. He smacked her on the back of the hand as he passed her. “Leave some for the rest of us,” he said with a hearty laugh. The relationship between brother and sister was intensified by the three-year age difference between the two. He turned, running square into his father’s chest. He paused for a second before he looked up, saying, “Morning Baba.”

“Good morning *beta*. Why aren’t you dressed for school yet?” He yelled after his fleeing

son.

“Just getting dressed Baba,” Tariq called down the stairs. “I had to give Nouman my shoes to polish.”

The Lt. General turned into the dining room, finding his daughter dressed and ready for school. “Morning Baba,” she spoke out of her mouthful of *puri*. “*Kya haal hai?*”

“I can always count on my *chotu* to be ready on time,” he said, kissing her on the forehead. He took his seat and opened the newspaper to catch up on the previous evening’s news, while Ayla brought a fresh cup of coffee in for him. “Ayla, no *halwa puri* for me. Just toast and jam.” Ayela nodded and went back to the kitchen to prepare his breakfast.

The General reached for his coffee, paused when he felt the vibration on his hip. Deliberately, he poured the coffee, leisurely taking a sip before checking to see who was calling. Recognizing the number, he got up and moved to another room, cup in hand, before he answered, “Hello?”

“Sir, we need you at GHQ urgently,” the voice said.

“Soldier, slow down,” the General said. “What’s the problem?”

“Sir, the Chief has ordered a protocol red with immediate effect and needs you here to countersign.”

The General froze. Protocol red is the highest alert status in the armed forces. It takes the entire country to a state of red alert readiness. He would need to issue orders to all force commanders, countersigning for the COAS. *What’s happened? Is Pakistan under attack?*

“Soldier, why have we moved to a protocol red?”

“Sir, turn on the television,” the voice replied. “The Prime Minister has been assassinated. There will be a military escort at your gate within the next five minutes.”

The General had not realized that the coffee cup had dropped from his hand, shattering on the marble floor below. Everyone in the house had come running from around the house to check on the General. He could hear the voices in the background talking to him, but couldn’t make out what they were saying. Flipping on the television, he switched between PTV, CNN and BBC, all carrying the same story.

“The Prime Minister of Pakistan, Azam Shah, has been assassinated, traveling from his home to the Prime Minister’s Secretariat. The President of Pakistan has implemented a state of emergency in the country and the army has been ordered onto the streets to control any potential unrest. All agencies have been ordered to suspend other activities and find those responsible for this heinous action,” the on-air reporter repeated over and over.

In the midst of the commotion around him, his phone began to vibrate again. He quickly answered, expecting to find someone from his office calling for instructions on the other side. He was sadly mistaken.

“We thought that a distraction would make it easier for you to support our interests,” the voice said. “We can get anyone we want, anywhere we want,” was all it said before the line went dead.

## CHAPTER 12

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“He’ll be with you in a moment,” the aide ushered them into the State Room at President’s House. “He’s just finishing the recording of his address to the nation.” The group of soberly dressed men that walked in comprised leading voices in the political government and decision-makers on the forward course of action after the assassination. The whole city was eerily silent the day after, with vigils being held at the Prime Minister’s residence, the site of the assassination and outside the Parliament House. All the men in the room had travelled together to the family residence to give their condolences before heading on to Faisal Masjid, where Prime Minister Azam Shah’s body was interned awaiting the funeral and burial.

The State Room was crowded with flower bouquets from heads of state, both in attendance and those unable to attend. The assassination had brought an outpouring of sorrow from every country of the world, whether friendly or unfriendly to Pakistan. The men glanced around the room at the flags that had been placed on each denoting the relationships between Pakistan and the community of nations. The Senate Chairman remembered being in this same room almost ten years ago when the last military dictator had been killed by a car bomb in Nowshera. His sorrow today included memories of that one. The attention of the men was drawn to the placards sitting on the table, identifying their assigned seating for the meeting. They had barely taken their seats when the doors to the room were thrown open and two armed military escorts brought the President into the room. They all stood as he entered.

President Adnan Butt had kept himself out of the daily political bazaar that is Pakistan politics. He made great efforts to stay away from cameras, only meeting journalists on his own terms. He was not the media whore that was the rest of Pakistan’s political community. He had been selected by a unanimous vote of the Parliament for his business acumen and lack of political affiliations, a first in Pakistan’s history. Normally, the President was a puppet of the Prime Minister’s party or a stooge for the bureaucrats. Adnan Butt was neither. Now, he had been unwillingly thrust into the fish market that he had avoided since taking his oath almost a year ago.

“Take your seats,” the President said. “The motorcade is being readied, but I wanted to have a few minutes with you all first.”

“Mr. President, why would you call us here?” asked Tariq Nadeem, Speaker of the National Assembly. “We should be with the family during this time.”

“Speaker sahib, we have to make decisions now,” the President replied. “I understand everyone’s grief, but the nation needs to see a government united to help them heal.”

Saeed Ghani, the law minister, cleared his throat, “Gentlemen, the problem we have is

that the Constitution of Pakistan never took this into account. Unlike other countries, we don't have a line of succession. The government stands without a leader."

The men around the table shared perplexed glances before turning back to the law minister. Tariq Nadeem was the first to speak up, "How are we without a leader? As the next highest office in the National Assembly, I should take over as Prime Minister."

"That is not completely correct, Mr. Speaker," Aijaz Awan, Chairman of the Senate, spoke up a little hesitantly. "While you may be the next highest in the National Assembly, I am the next powerful in terms of Constitutional powers. I should take the Prime Minister's chair."

The Speaker looked to his deputy, expecting support for his candidacy, only to find that he didn't want to take anyone's side. "Minister, what does the Constitution say?" asked Jaffer Shah.

"Article 95 states that if the office of the Prime Minister become vacant, for any reason," said Ghani, "we have fourteen days to elect a new Prime Minister from the National Assembly."

"The problem arises from our allies outside the country," President Butt explained. "They believe that if the office stays vacant for any length of time, the government may be removed by the opposition or the military. I need you to give me names for the Prime Minister by end of the day."

Aijaz suppressed his anger at the haste with which the President brought up this matter. Tariq wasn't so reticent. "The Prime Minister has been assassinated and his body sits at the masjid waiting for burial. And we're sitting here deciding who will take his place in the government. That is outlandish!" said Tariq, pounding his fist on the table.

"Mr. Speaker, I don't do this out of any joy, but through discussions with the law minister, opposition leader and other political notables," the President's tone was calm and businesslike. "I believe that you only have a short span of time to fill that chair before there are calls for a new election or the opposition starts to form coalitions to take the seat. You do remember that your party was only holding a small majority."

"Small majority is not our concern," Tariq shouted. "We are the government and should be allowed to find a suitable replacement for Azam Shah. We should not be constrained by you or anyone else's timeframes." Turning his anger to Saeed Ghani, "Why didn't you tell us this yourself? You were at the family residence this morning?"

"Mr. Speaker, I spoke to the family and the party leadership at the residence. You were not brought on board with the discussion at the leadership's request," said Ghani with a sly smile. He never really liked Tariq Nadeem, and was enjoying his upper hand, temporary as it may be.

"What would you have us do?" Tariq yelled at the President, who was moving towards the door.

“Who the fuck do you think you are? I am the President of this country and you will address me as such!” the President’s temper rose. “I am not one of your party bootlickers, so I would recommend that you not treat me as such. Otherwise, I may just send your government packing myself.”

Aijaz, seeing the opening created by Tariq’s behavior, lurched forward to position himself as the natural successor. “Mr. President, to get names to you by end of day would be near impossible. Could you give us some time to speak with the party leadership in this matter?”

“I have already given you until the end of the day,” the President replied brusquely. “I don’t care if you duel at ten paces for the honor. I want the names on my desk first thing in the morning. Otherwise, I take up serious conversations with the opposition parties on forming a government.” He stepped out the door without waiting for a response from the group, having left no doubts in their minds on his position.

They could hear the footsteps fading as they moved down the hall to the waiting motorcade outside. “The Prime Minister was the leader of the party. Do we start there?” Tariq said, still fuming from the lack of support he had received. “We can’t make this decision without a named party leader, otherwise the government will be stuck between two decision-makers.”

“We don’t have the time to elect a new party leader *and* consider names for the Prime Minister in one day,” Aijaz answered. “The entire party will be at the funeral, we need to discuss it with them there.” He stood, adjusting his white cotton *shalwar kameez*. He left the room, his mind already racing with the alliances he would need to form. He had worked hard to support his party whether in government or in opposition. His climb through the ranks had been full of successful programs in his home province of Baluchistan and the federal government, leading to support from politicians across the spectrum.

Tariq turned to Jaffer Shah, seething in anger from his show of defiance. “You’re my deputy! How dare you not support my bid for Prime Minister?” Tariq growled through clenched teeth. “The party will stand with me.” If there was ever a direct opposite to another person, Tariq Nadeem was that to Aijaz Awan. Having been the party’s blue-eyed boy, he had never had to achieve anything himself. Instead, he had been regularly placated with cabinet positions because he was the Prime Minister’s son-in-law, a fact he expected to grant him the highest seat in the country.

“The party leadership may support you, but the alliance partners won’t,” said a calm Jaffer Shah. A seasoned politician from the NWFP, he had built his long career spanning over two decades as a kingmaker, and now served as the Deputy Speaker in the National Assembly. Solely responsible for collapsing several opposing governments, Jaffer’s abilities had been put to the test forming the current coalition to secure Azam Shah’s Prime

Minister seat. If anyone could stop Tariq Nadeem, it was him.

“So we give more cabinet seats and benefits to the coalition partners to get me elected. What’s the harm in that?” Tariq said, inches from Jaffer’s face. “Get it done!”

“Do I look like your fucking houseboy?” Jaffer said, grabbing Tariq’s arm with a hard grip, saying “And let’s be clear. To get Azam elected, we gave up the finance, religious affairs, Kashmir and petroleum ministries, along with two Chief Minister seats. We also created another ten cabinet positions to get him the votes he needed.”

“I don’t care what we give up. I will be Prime Minister when this is over!” exclaimed Tariq.

“You may be willing to give up defense, foreign affairs and other ministries for your seat, but the party will not!” Jaffer fired back. “That would make us the de jure government without any power over policy.”

Tariq stopped and thought for a moment, then with a grimace said, “Houseboy or not, you will do what the party leadership says. And they will support me for Prime Minister.” He turned and descended down the stairs to his waiting Range Rover. He had a motorcade to join, a funeral to attend and a leadership to convince.

Jaffer Shah, dejected, turned to the law minister who had been watching the entire exchange. “The government has collapsed. Let the President know,” he said, shaking his head. “Our shortest term ever and this time it’s our own fault,” he mumbled, as he turned and descended the stairs to his awaiting vehicle. He kept thinking to himself that this would most probably be his own exit from the party he has served honorably for most of his life.

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“Chief, we can’t trust the politicians to find a way out of this,” said Lt. Gen. Bilal Siddiqui. “They will cut each other’s throats for the PM seat. It can only damage Pakistan further.”

“Bilal, the country will not accept us stepping in at this point,” said General Amjad Ali, Chief of Army Staff. “Look at what the journalists are already saying about us,” he said passing a file down the table. “We are already being accused of a major security lapse. If we step in now, they will be saying that we orchestrated the assassination.”

They sat barely twenty kilometers away from President’s House, but the Army command around the table knew they were thousands of kilometers away in perspective. Outspoken journalists had not wasted any time getting onto international news channels to decry the army’s security lapse and their failure to stop the assassination, while domestic newspapers carried much harsher accusations in their headlines. It almost seemed that they had forgotten that it was an elected government, with the protection of the civilian law



enforcement organizations. *No, they hadn't forgotten*, General Ali thought, *they just liked to blame the Army rather than admit that the civilians had failed yet again*. His next steps had to be carefully thought out, otherwise the international media would be singing the same refrain.

"Gentlemen, the world expects us to step in and take over the country, but we must resist," General Ali continued. "The government must find their feet...and quickly. There is no reason to embroil ourselves in controversy again."

"Chief, I think we're making a mistake. Bilal is right, the politicians will spend the next few months jockeying for superiority in the Parliament while the country suffers," said Lt. Gen. Hassan Alam, Corps Commander Multan. "We cannot allow this to happen."

"Hassan, I know your personal animosity towards this party, but we must show our discipline. If they're going to fail, they must fail on their own. We can't be seen as the catalyst," said General Ali, hoping to calm down one of his most trusted lieutenants.

Lt. General Hassan Alam had been Corps Commander Lahore, one of the most prized postings in the Pakistan Army due to its forward position against India, prior to the Shah government coming into power. They had never liked him because of his refusal to kowtow to political whimsy with army personnel. Four years ago, Azam Shah, then Chief Minister of Punjab, had a very public dispute with Alam over his refusal to post army soldiers as protection for his relatives. This was the first of many public disagreements that led to his transfer from Lahore to Multan. General Amjad Ali had personally fought to keep Alam in Lahore due to its strategic significance, but Shah, now Prime Minister, eventually won by introducing a series of legislations in the Parliament to strip the COAS of many powers, transferring them to the Ministry of Defense. General Ali conceded in return for the quashing of the legislations, knowing that a failure to do so would have put both on a collision course.

"Our job is to support the government investigation into the assassination," the General said, trying to keep order among the commanders. "Misbah, Asim, what do we know?"

"We have just returned from the Interior Minister's office and a meeting with the law enforcement agencies. What a clusterfuck!" said Lt. Gen. Asim Junejo. "Everyone was accusing everyone else for the failure. It just made good sense for the two of us to watch the shit-storm," he said laughing. "I have no doubt that this assassination will end with the same result as in the past. No one will be arrested. No one will be held responsible."

"We need to be concerned about the investigation, Asim," said Lt. Gen. Misbah Qadir. "All the civilian intelligence organizations are running around like chickens with their heads cut off, fighting amongst themselves to lead, but no one will follow the other. I can assure you that each is forming independent teams as we speak. This will fall at our doorstep in the end."

"Misbah, can you and Asim form a joint internal team to start looking at the

information that we have and what is generated from the civilians?” General Ali asked. “If this is going to fall to us in the end, we might as well start now.”

“Already in progress, General,” said Misbah. “I think we should talk about Bajaur. There may be some roots to this from there.”

“Misbah, let’s keep that off the table for now. I want more intel from our operative before we put that time bomb on the table.”

“Sir, I think we need to consider that this has the possibility of being orchestrated by an unfriendly country with assets in the country. That is Bajaur,” said Misbah, trying to get the General to pick up the issue with the other commanders.

General Ali shrugged it off saying, “We need more intel before we can make that decision. But I do agree with you that this is not a domestic plot.”

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“Where is this coming from, Faheem?” asked Brigadier Imtiaz Riaz, Director General of the Frontier Constabulary.

“Sir, we’ve been monitoring a group of people working in the mountains of Khar,” Faheem explained, trying to make what he was saying actionable in the Brigadier’s eyes. “We have seen these two frequently at their camp over the past five months.”

“In Khar?” the DG asked. “You have been in monthly meetings with me since you were promoted to Post Commander. Why is this the first time you are mentioning this?”

“Sir, we had nothing to connect the intelligence until the Prime Minister’s assassination,” Faheem said. “Before that, it could have just been tribals getting together to blow off some aggression. They still like to think Afghanistan is at war.”

“But what makes you think its these two that we should focus on?” said Imtiaz. “You said that it was a group, so what makes these two stand out?”

“Brigadier sahib, I don’t know what makes them stand out. They make me suspicious,” Faheem said glancing away. “Can I be honest with you?”

Imtiaz nodded his head. “If you want me to authorize any action, I expect it.”

“You know that I’m from Khyber Agency, right?” Faheem said. “Well, I asked some old friends there. Showed them pictures. They knew one of them.” Quickly flipping through the photos he had provided the DG, he pulled out Dawood’s picture, “This one. He was involved in some high profile kidnap for ransom cases. A couple went wrong and he shot the targets. He’s a loose cannon.”

Faheem paused for a moment, waiting for the Brigadier’s ambitious streak to kick in. He had been on the fast track in the army at one time, until he was assigned to the Anti-Narcotics Force in Baluchistan. He had been tipped off to a major shipment of drug running through Quetta headed for the Far East through Karachi. Only, when they seized

the shipment, it was not drugs and the transport belonged to an influential politician. The army gave him two options — retire with nothing but his rank or be demoted and join the FC. He went from Colonel to Lieutenant Colonel and was posted to Peshawar. Ten years later, he saw an opportunity to return to the army as a hero.

“What is your action plan?” Imtiaz asked.

“Sir, I know Dawood has disappeared, but the other one is easy to find,” Faheem told his Commander. “I think he can tell us where to find Dawood...given the right motivation. Maybe even lead us right to him. But sir, I need authorization to operate in Peshawar.”

“If you take him, how sure are you that you can get the information?” Imtiaz asked. “The whole country is tense and any wrong step could mean our careers. Convince me that these two will lead to something concrete.”

“Sir, I’m embarrassed to say this,” Faheem said fumbling with the words. “Your expertise would be a great asset in extracting information. I would only be able to...ah...I wouldn’t be able to go to the next level without killing him.”

Imtiaz leaned back in his chair, putting his feet up on his desk. He had the needed expertise and had broken hardened criminals in the past. He also wanted to make sure that the required information was extracted; otherwise his career would be over. “Yes, I think I will join you. We can’t afford to miss this opportunity.”

Faheem smiled, believing that he had gotten what he needed to. Whether the Brigadier joined or not was not the point, as long as he had authority to operate in Peshawar. He already had an abandoned warehouse for the interrogation, it was just a matter of getting Kaleem. Before joining the FC, Faheem has performed many snatch and grab operations. He had shared that information with the Brigadier, only he substituted Dawood’s name for his own. *Semantics, only semantics*, he thought to himself.

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The road had been blocked for traffic since the night before. In spite of the roadblock there were thousands thronged along the roadside from President’s House to Faisal Mosque. Everyone from regular citizens to party loyalists had made the trek to Islamabad to be part of the funeral procession. The funeral had been delayed to allow for heads of state to arrive in Pakistan, only making the security concerns greater. With the US Secretary of State and British Foreign Minister in attendance, whoever had assassinated the Prime Minister had another opportunity to do greater damage to the nation’s reputation.

The President’s motorcade turned off Constitution Avenue and gained speed down Jinnah Avenue, where they could see the snipers posted on top of buildings and army

soldiers lined the parade route. The police had been moved to the perimeters to control the influx of people and traffic to the roads leading to Faisal Mosque. There was very little chance that anyone would get a shot at the President's motorcade with the police and military escorts closely flanking the vehicle, but all precautions had been taken. It took all of twenty minutes for a normal citizen on a normal day to travel the nine kilometers, but the motorcade would be able to do it within four minutes with the roads cleared and sirens blazing.

Sitting in the Mercedes, President Butt reviewed the speech that he had recorded prior to leaving President's House, wondering if this would be his last act as President of Pakistan. The President glanced down at his vibrating phone, debating whether to pick it up or not. He didn't want to be seen by the media stepping out of his vehicle at the funeral with a phone to his ear. So he checked to see who was calling first. *Anyone with a television can see that I'm traveling to the funeral ground*, he thought to himself, *why would they call now?* The phone stopped vibrating for a moment, only to start again almost immediately. Now, visibly perturbed by the interruption, he pulled up his phone and handed it to his aide, with a simple, "Answer it and tell them we're busy."

"Hello," said the aide.

"President sahib?"

"No, I'm sorry. I'm his aide. He's unavailable at the moment."

"Tell him it's Saeed Ghani on the phone. He will speak with me."

"Please hold, Minister sahib."

The aide looked at the President, as the façade of Faisal Mosque began to emerge in the front windshield, and offered him the phone. "Sir, it's Saeed Ghani. He needs to speak with you."

President Butt took a deep breath and told the driver to drive past the mosque's front entrance to the VVIP entrance on the side. Taking the phone, he barked, "What is it, Saeed? Why are you not here?"

"Mr. President, I'm two cars behind you, but needed to inform you of what happened after you left the meeting," Ghani said. "You were right. They started fighting amongst themselves within minutes of your announcement."

"And?" the President asked, anxious to see if his plan had played out as expected.

"Jaffer Shah says that the government is collapsed. The ball looks to be in your court now," Ghani said with a slight tone change in his voice.

"Ghani, don't start getting excited yet," said President Butt. "They have fourteen days to elect a new Prime Minister. Let's see who they put forward and what they do."

"But, Mr. President..." Ghani tried to continue.

"Ghani, not now," cautioned the President. "Every intelligence agency in the world is listening to our calls right now. We can discuss this in detail later." With a snap, he hung

up the call.

The car jerked to a stop in front of the VVIP entrance and security leapt from their vehicles to form a human shield around the President. Quickly ushered into the mosque, he was taken to a secure room where other foreign dignitaries were already waiting. Before joining the funeral, he had to meet the dignitaries who would not be attending the funeral prayers. He entered the room to find all of the dignitaries in a receiving line awaiting him.

“Mr. Secretary, thank you for being here. I am sure the Prime Minister would be honored,” the President said, shaking hands with the David Northrup, the US Secretary of State.

“Mr. President, Pakistan has been a long term ally in South Asia. We had hoped that the President himself would travel here, but his schedule didn’t have an opening,” Northrup said. “He will be calling you personally later.”

“Thank you, David. Foreign Minister Johnstone, thank you for coming,” the President said, moving down the line.

“Mr. President, the British government and its people all share Pakistan’s sorrow,” said Nick Johnstone, British Foreign Minister. “The Prime Minister was a close friend of Azam Shah. He has already called the family to offer his condolences. He should be calling you in a short time.”

The President moved down the line of foreign functionaries, repeatedly checking his watch as he knew that the funeral was being held up for his inclusion. His aide came alongside and whispered in his ear, “Sir, you must join the funeral now. Everyone is here and they can’t wait any longer.”

The President nodded that he had heard, apologizing to the remaining dignitaries before moving down the stairs to join his country in mourning the loss of its Prime Minister. The aides led him to the front of the masjid and his spot between the Chief of Army Staff and the Speaker of the National Assembly, as the Imam began the funeral prayer, broadcast across Pakistan via the PTV cameras mounted around the gallery of the masjid.

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On a lonely street in Peshawar’s University Town, a man stood outside in the dead of night looking for a way to get home. A rickshaw sped by, only to slam on his brakes and do a u-turn in the middle of the road, returning to inquire if the man needed a ride.

“Where to?” the rickshaw driver asked, killing his engine to be able to hear him better.

“I’m not going in a rickshaw,” the man told the driver, unwilling to trouble his already tired mind with the incessant tuc-tuc of the rickshaw engine.

“Oh ho, why?” the rickshaw driver asked. “It’s the middle of the night and you’re

standing on a street where very few vehicles will come by. Let me take you to the main road at least,” trying to coax the man into his vehicle.

“No! *Rickshaw kei na zam!*” the man angrily replied, walking a few steps away.

The rickshaw driver pulled the handle to start his engine back up and uttered a few expletives before hitting the gas and rushing down the road.

The man continued to stand on the road waiting, checking his watch every few minutes, but there was no sign of any vehicles coming from either side. Angered that he had not taken the rickshaw driver’s advice and gone to the main road, he started walking. He hadn’t walked more than three hundred yards when a taxi came whipping around a corner almost hitting him. The man jumped out of the way, landing on his backside in the gravel. The driver realizing his error, an unlikely occurrence for a taxi driver in Pakistan, slammed on his brakes and hurried out to see if the man was okay.

“Oh my God! I didn’t hit you, did I?” The taxi driver said panicked. “Are you hurt?”

“My God! What the hell were you doing?” the man said. “You could have killed me!”

“I’m sorry. So sorry, sahib gee,” the driver said, helping him to his feet. “Let me at least take you home. You should not be walking on this street at night,” he said, opening the back door to his taxi.

The man, who had been looking for a taxi most of the evening, was pleased that he had not only gotten what he wanted, but would also get it for free now. Climbing into the back seat of the taxi, he commented, “I live in Hayatabad Phase 1, just before the Industrial Estate begins. Will that be a problem?”

“No, no problem,” the driver commented, jumping into the driver’s seat. “I just want to make sure that you are okay. Should we stop at the hospital just to make sure?”

“No, I’m fine,” said the man, checking his arms and legs for bruising. “It’s just some scrapes and scratches. I have bandages at home.”

“My name is Kaleem,” said the driver glancing in the rearview mirror as he pulled away. “What’s yours?”

“Faheem.”

## CHAPTER 13

\*

Standing in the hall of the abandoned warehouse, blood dripped from his body, leaving a trail on the grimy floor. A body was slumped in the chair in the middle of the hall with a singular light hanging above, illuminating a small radius around it. Another body lay in the doorway propping the door open. The fight inside had been more than expected from the three days he spent surveying the warehouse. By his count, there should not have been more than five men both inside and out. Instead, he had found almost seven men around the facility.

They had prepared well for his arrival.

On his approach, he saw one man guarding the entrance. *There were usually two...where's the other one?* Kamal shook off the thought and sized up his enemy, noting that he was a scrawny soldier that didn't fill his uniform. He ducked into the shadows where he could use the darkness against the soldier, catching him by surprise. He rushed the guard, knocking him to the ground before he could set himself or draw his weapon. With a quick strike to the head, the first guard was neutralized. Before he could get up, he heard the door to the warehouse open. Jumping to his feet, Kamal saw the second guard emerge, finding Kamal hovering over his partner's incapacitated body. The guard, surprisingly, dropped his AK-47 and rushed at Kamal, driving him into the concrete wall of the warehouse with a shoulder block. As he pulled back from Kamal, he landed two solid right crosses to his jaw stunning Kamal and giving himself time to set for the fight.

Kamal pulled himself up from one knee, gasping for air and taking the time to assess his opponent. The guard didn't wait for Kamal to position himself and struck again with a swift kick to his midriff, bring the taste of blood to Kamal's mouth. *Oh, that is just unacceptable.* Kamal spat the blood onto the ground and spun around, taking the guard's legs out with a vicious kick to his knees. As the guard hit the ground, Kamal launched himself onto him, grabbing his neck in a chokehold. The guard threw elbows behind him and kicked helplessly in the air as Kamal increased the pressure on his throat. Within minutes, his body stopped fighting and he was down.

Kamal stood, spitting a few times to clear the blood that had filled his mouth, finally using the sleeve of his shirt to wipe the remaining away. He smirked, admiring his work. *Not as tough as he looked.*

Standing over both bodies, his plan rapidly changed. Grabbing the second guard by the legs, he dragged him around the corner and pulled his uniform off. Silently and rapidly, Kamal undressed and pulled on the FC garb. *Won, this fits well.* The guard had seemed so much larger than himself. He ripped his own shirt in half, using half to tie the guard's hands together and the other half to seal his mouth, in case he came to and tried to warr

the others. Kamal laughed silently, giving the guard another hard kick to the head. *Just for good measure, you son of a bitch.*

He entered the warehouse corridor, looking for the other guards. Spotting one about fifty feet down, he straightened his shoulders and called to him, "Did he come through here?"

The guard was surprised by the question. He hadn't heard or seen anything. He strolled over to Kamal to find out what his colleague was talking about. "What?"

Kamal waited till he was close enough, and casually raised his arm, as if to indicate towards the door. Gun in hand, he brought his arm down in a vicious swipe to the guard's head, knocking him out cold. He fell hard into the wall from the blow and as he slid down, his gun clattered to the ground noisily. The commotion alerted another guard who came rushing around the corner, sidearm in hand. Seeing his compatriot laid out on the ground, with a fellow soldier standing over him, he slowed down.

"What happened to Ayaz?"

"I don't know! I came in looking for the guy that knocked Sheraz out and found him like this," Kamal said, quietly pulling his sidearm from the holster.

"We should warn Faheem that we have a guest," the soldier said, turning to warn his superior. Kamal waited for him to get a safe distance away and fired two rounds into his back, dropping him to the ground like a wounded deer. The guard tried to roll himself over to fire back at Kamal, but the round had damaged his spine badly, leaving him face down on the floor. Kamal went over and fired another round into his head, and almost as a second thought, changed his sidearm with the guard's.

Kamal moved a few yards down the corridor when another soldier jumped from behind a crate hitting him with the butt of his AK-47, stunning him. *What the fuck?* Kamal thought, reaching up to find blood coming from just above his eye. "What's your problem soldier? Don't you recognize your own?" he said, glaring at the attacker. The guard hesitated for a moment but something must have alerted him, because he drew his weapon back again. Kamal used all his body weight to jam the weapon and soldier against the wall; he could feel his eye swelling up already, and he preferred not to expend any more energy than he had to.

"Are you fucking stupid?" Kamal growled at the guard. "Don't you realize that we're under attack? And you're wasting your energy on me?" He could feel the soldier relax, and calmly jabbed his elbow into the man's face. The guard dropped his gun, stunned understanding creeping into his eyes. Kamal swung the AK-47 onto his own shoulder, and stuck his sidearm into the man's ribs. Slipping in behind him, Kamal guided him down the corridor to the doorway faintly lit by the bulb that hung above it. He whispered, "Now, let's find Faheem."

"He'll kill you," the guard muttered. "And the little traitor that he's captured. You



won't leave here alive."

*Traitor? Kaleem?* Kamal used the butt of his sidearm to punish the side of the guard's face, silencing him. He fired at the bulb, watching it shatter into thousands of pieces and the corridor descend into darkness. A small sliver of light showed him where the door was — where Kaleem was, he assumed, along with Faheem.

"Faheem!" Kamal yelled down the corridor. "Surrender and I'll spare you and your men."

"Spare us?" hollered Faheem, laughing loudly at Kamal's comment. "There is an entire FC team coming. It will be you that will need to be spared, Dawood!"

As he reached the doorframe, he stopped to prop up the guard that he had taken hostage and shoved him into the frame. The body drew Faheem's fire, falling backward and collapsing from the impact of the rounds. As the dust settled, Kamal slipped in the door, finding a dark corner for himself in the small room. A single bulb hung from the ceiling, creating a small pool of light on the ground, but he couldn't see Faheem or Kaleem.

"Ayaz! Sheraz! Waqar!" Faheem hollered in the empty hall, trying to determine who had been struck by the rounds and if Dawood was still alive. "Nizam, go check the corridor!"

Kamal heard heavy footsteps echoing through the hall, as Nizam ran right past him to determine the situation outside. He heard the footsteps stop, sliding from one side to the other as Nizam explored the area outside the little room. Kamal held his position in the darkness waiting to see if Faheem would emerge from the shadows.

"Commander, all three in the corridor are down," Nizam reported back, still standing in the doorway. "I don't see Dawood."

"*Ay khair bachiya,*" Faheem called out. "Don't you understand that you're outnumbered? You won't escape alive. It would be better if you just stepped out of your hiding place and surrendered to us." Faheem pushed a chair out of the darkness, "I won't kill him if you come out now!"

*Kaleem!* Kamal couldn't tell if the boy was still alive. He was slumped down in the chair, motionless, covered in blood and his head hung low to his chest. "Come out now!" Faheem yelled.

Kamal closed his eyes at the shout, tracking the voice's general direction and just listened. There was a small shuffle, and Kamal fired twice into the shadow, hearing one bullet hit a wall. But the second found its mark, causing Faheem to yelp like a wounded dog. Kamal dropped flat on the ground and crawled quickly along the wall as Faheem and Nizam both opened fire in the direction of the first shots. The bullets ricocheted off the concrete floor or drove into the wall. Crouching behind what felt like a stack of cut boards, Kamal felt a burning sensation moving up his thigh. He reached down, finding the

hole in his pants and warm blood coating his fingers. *Shit! I'm hit.* Caught in the crossfire, he shrugged it off, using his sniper skills to block out the radiating pain.

Faheem stepped out of the shadows and ducked behind Kaleem's chair, rotating it to provide cover as he moved. "Dawood! You stupid son of a bitch, you have no way out. We have the only exit covered! Make this easier on yourself."

Kamal had been very lucky that Brigadier Imtiaz had not fully believed Faheem's intelligence report on them. The Brigadier has sought confirmation from Military Intelligence and the ISI, who had done their best to call him off the trail. They had told Imtiaz that the ISI had someone inside and any stupidity on his part would compromise the deep cover operation. The Brigadier could not be faulted. He saw a promotion and medal in his future. How could he have known that his target was the deep cover ISI operative himself?

Kamal knew that the Brigadier was en route to the warehouse along with reinforcements. He had to stave off the attack until they arrived and he could reveal his identity to him. He had gone to ground almost two weeks ago when a visitor passed a message through a trusted source. "You're blown," was all that he was told. The three words that any deep cover operative fears more than anything else, especially in hostile territory.

Kamal heard sliding footsteps to his left. Realizing that Nizam was just steps away from discovering him, he slowly climbed to his feet and waited for another footstep. With uncanny precision, he landed his pistol firmly on Nizam's head, causing him to stumble backward. Nizam growled with anger at being taken by surprise and hit out, flailing wildly, looking to grab his attacker. He was a big man with long arms, and with Kamal's range of motion compromised by the bullet in his leg, Nizam managed to connect with his attacker. He grabbed hold of Kamal's shirt and jerked him forward, landing a head-butt against his already closed and swollen eyelid.

Kamal stumbled backward, blood flowing freely from the cut above his eye again. *Where is Faheem?* He struggled to keep the other man in his periphery, but ended up paying dearly for his momentary distraction, as Nizam landed a kick to the bloody thigh, further hobbling him. *Is that...* he thought as he dove away from Nizam, dodging the flare that was thrown in his direction. Faheem obviously wanted to shed light on his attacker so they could better target him. Nizam took full advantage of the extra illumination and rushed at Kamal, prone on the floor, hoping to land his boot to the side of his head. Kamal read the move and instinctively rolled away, simultaneously grabbing Nizam's leg and tumbling him to the ground.

Kamal, doing his best to control the pain that was rushing through his body, raised himself to his feet and landed two strong kicks to Nizam's head with his good leg. Nizam's head bounced off the concrete floor each time and he lay motionless. For good measure,

Kamal took his sidearm and fired two shots into Nizam's head.

Faheem had taken cover at the shots. Kamal turned himself around, looking for any signs of where Faheem had taken cover, but was unable to pinpoint where he might be. *Draw him out of the shadows*, Kamal thought as he hobbled over to Kaleem's body.

"Kaleem, Kaleem!" Kamal yelled, slapping him across the face. He paused for a second to reach down to check for a pulse. *Faint, but he's alive*. Kamal lifted Kaleem over his shoulder, wincing from the pain in his torso from by the repeated blows. "I'll get us out of here," he said to his friend, "just hang on." He moved towards the door, knowing there was only one escape route, which would most likely end with a confrontation with either Faheem or the Brigadier and his reinforcements. He could tell the Brigadier who he was, but not Faheem. That information would end up in Bajaur.

Reaching the door, Kamal poked his head out to see if anyone was in the corridor. He saw a shadow move in the corridor and quickly pulled back into the hall. Glancing around, he found a dark corner where he could put Kaleem, while he dealt with the shadow in the corridor. Setting him down, Kamal heard a noise in the hall behind him. He sat motionless, protected by the darkness that engulfed him, surveying the area for clues to the direction of the sound. He had been struggling with dark spots in his eyes since the goon struck his head, but he was sure that he saw something move to his right.

"You might as well come out," a voice hollered. "We have you surrounded."

Kamal quietly moved from his location to one closer to the voice, and called out, "Who the fuck is we?"

"We are the Frontier Constabulary," said the voice, giving Kamal a better indication of where the person was standing in the darkness. "Come out now, Dawood! Or we open fire!"

*Open fire? Is he kidding? He has no idea where I am*. Kamal called out again, slowly moving closer to the voice, "Open fire. You'll only kill your own."

"Do you think this is a negotiation?" the voice yelled. "Show yourself."

"If you're FC, you're a ranking officer," Kamal called back. "Protocol demands that you identify yourself."

Suddenly, the tone of the voice changed. That the intruder was familiar with the keyword protocol followed by the military for hostage situations made him realize that he was dealing with someone who either is or was military.

"Name and rank, soldier!" the voice called out, booming through the warehouse.

"Fuck you and your name and rank!" Kamal answered, moving again in the darkness behind the Brigadier. "You know who I am. Tell me who the fuck you are!"

The silence was deafening as Brigadier Imtiaz contemplated his next move. *Is my luck really this shitty? Did I authorize the capture and interrogation of an ISI operative based on faulty intelligence?* His mind spun in different directions, contemplating the fallout from this

hurried decision that had been backed only by his over-ambitious ego.

“Men, lower your...” the voice shouted out. His sentence was stopped midstream, as Kamal snatched his sidearm and placed its cool barrel against his temple.

“When you were told that the ISI had a deep cover operative, why would you carry out this mission?” Kamal growled in his ear. “Are you really that stupid? Tell them to lower their weapons and come out of the shadows.”

The Brigadier could feel his throat closing from the chokehold Kamal applied. Tightening it slightly, he ordered him again, “Tell them!” before slightly releasing the hold to allow the Brigadier to speak. In the cover of darkness, no one had seen him take the Brigadier and not being seen would facilitate his escape without blowing his cover.

“Men, we have a friendly here.” The Brigadier’s raspy voice quavered as he called out to his troops. “Lower your weapons and show yourselves.”

“Wait one minute and then turn on the lights,” Kamal whispered into his ear. He released his hold on the Brigadier’s throat. He had no intention of being there when the lights came on.

Someone pulled a lever, bringing all the lights in the warehouse on. Kaleem’s bruised body lay motionless in a corner. The two closest soldiers ran towards him to check his vital signs, tripping over another body as they ran towards him.

“Men, fan out and search the warehouse,” the Brigadier ordered. “Make sure there are no hostiles left inside.” The Brigadier glanced around the hall for the person who had, moments earlier, had him in a chokehold, but saw no one. His hand instinctively dropped to his sidearm, finding it in his holster, creating even greater confusion in his mind. *Why would he leave the gun? He didn’t know how many men I have with me.* Looking around the warehouse, all he saw were bodies and blood trails, and his own soldiers, gingerly moving through the building.

Kamal stood on the roof of the warehouse, watching the entire show below. He knew that he had escaped with his life. Kaleem had been sacrificed as the friendly in this encounter, but the bloodlust that the Sheikh had for Dawood was not going to be quenched with just one sacrifice. He would want Dawood as well. Below him was a contingent of FC personnel patrolling the street and making his escape from the building roof impossible. He would just have to wait them out. The Colonel knew that there was a friendly there and the ISI would not confirm the identity after such a brazen attack on an operative. He would have no reason to leave anyone behind for surveillance, and even if he did, Kamal was confident that he could slip away unnoticed.

Realizing that it may be a while before he could move, Kamal relaxed against the concrete roof, finally taking stock of the various injuries that were battling for his attention. Slumping down against the short wall that surrounded the roof, he slowly slipped into unconsciousness. His last thought was a growing desire to even the score with

the Sheikh.

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A long, troublesome ten days had already passed since the Prime Minister's assassination. President Butt had stopped speaking to the media at his official visits because he had no new information from any quarter. The law enforcement agencies had not progressed beyond the ballistics on the bullet and the shooter's location. The investigation was moving too slow for the President, but that was secondary to the real issue — filling the seat vacated by Azam Shah.

The Muslim League had petitioned the Supreme Court for an extension of the fourteen-day Constitutional time limit so they could elect a new member to fill the vacant seat, which would mean at least another forty-five days before a new Prime Minister was elected. The court was still deliberating the petition, while various party members were pledging their allegiance to leading names in the party. At last count, the President's media cell had Tariq Nadeem and Aijaz Awan as the front-runners, but a new player had emerged over the past few days. Ahsan Chaudhry, the Federal Interior Minister, was gaining ground quickly and many politicians from other parties were extending their support to him as well. Chaudhry was a known player in the political scene, had already built strong relationships with all the parties and seemed to be acceptable to the party leadership, since no one was attacking him in the media. President Butt wanted clarification and to move the country forward, tired of holding the position of spokesman for the ruling party. He planned on organizing that in the afternoon at a hurriedly arranged meeting.

Tariq Nadeem was the first to arrive at President House, but he didn't come alone. As the doors to President House opened, the aide waiting to receive the Speaker was overwhelmed with his entourage. Nadeem looked like he was leading a conquering army, he thought to himself, as people streamed in the door. He cordially welcomed the Speaker and led him to the conference room a few doors down from the State Room. Aijaz Awan arrived with similar pomp and circumstance, as a second aide received him at another entrance. He was seen to the same conference room where Tariq Nadeem was waiting.

Saeed Ghani slipped in quietly with his aides from the law ministry and went straight to the President's office.

In the outer office, the President's secretary greeted Ghani with a smile, "Good afternoon, minister. Are you here for the meeting?"

Ghani nodded. "Good afternoon, Ayesha. Is he free? I'd like to speak to him before the meeting."

Ayesha, with a puzzled look on her face, said "Minister sahib, I don't think that will be

possible. They are already inside waiting for you.”

Ghani’s head spun around in shock. Neither the Speaker or the Senate Chairman were known for their punctuality, yet somehow they had gotten here before him. With a shrug, he said, “Well, I guess I’ll join them then.”

The secretary grabbed her pad from the desk and knocked on the door, waiting for the President’s approval to enter. A booming voice came from the other side and she pushed the door open far enough for her slim body to slip through, closing it quickly behind her. *Stupid protocols from the British era — I have to be announced*, Ghani thought. Seconds later, the doors opened again and Ghani was invited in, crossing paths with the secretary on her way out.

“Mr. President,” Ghani said crossing the carpeted floor to the President’s desk. “How are you?”

He had been here on a number of occasions during the past eighteen months of their government. He was regularly called by the President’s office for legal advice on different policy measures being pursued by the ruling party. Outside of the official visits, he had very limited interaction with President Butt. Their relationship was officially cordial, but not friendly.

“I am very well, Saeed,” the President responded, shaking his hand. “I think you know everyone here,” motioning to the individuals occupying seats around the room.

“Of cour...” Ghani froze mid-sentence. He had expected to find the Speaker and Senate Chairman seated with the President. Instead, he saw Ahsan Chaudhry, Jaffar Shah, General Amjad Ali and Lt. General Misbah Qadir. “Where are Tariq and Aijaz?” a dumbfounded Ghani asked.

“Down the hall, waiting for us,” President Butt replied. “I wanted to have this private meeting first.

“I come from the business world, where delay is considered weakness,” President Butt continued, motioning for Ghani to take a seat. “I told the politicians in the room down the hall that I wanted a name within one day. It’s been ten. Rather than following my request, they approached the superior court for more time. It’s outrageous that they think their simple majority overrides my Constitutional authority.”

“Mr. President, what are you considering?” asked Ghani, confused by the President’s words.

“You need to explain to the men down the hall that I have picked the new Prime Minister,” the President stated, emotionless. “Ahsan Chaudhry will be the nominee, fully supported by his party, or the government will be dismissed and new elections called.” Ghani was shocked at the President’s declaration. He had obviously been playing politics behind the scenes and, as the delay extended, made decisions without bringing the ruling party on board. Jaffar Shah’s words from ten days ago echoed in the Ghani’s ears.

“Mr. President, the party may have selected you as President,” Ghani said, “But you carry no weight...no history with the party. Why would they accept your decision?”

“Accept? Who is asking for their acceptance?” President Butt said with a slight smile. “Make it clear to them that this is not a negotiation. It’s either my way, and they stay in power, or the elections, where they risk defeat after eighteen months of bad policy-making. I have made my decision. I need you to inform them of it.”

“Mr. President, we need to discuss this...” Ghani stammered, but President Butt wasn’t interested.

“We have discussed it,” the President said motioning around the room. “You now have the decision of this office. The office of the President of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. The President paused, letting his smile deepen. “Which also happens to be the only Constitutional office with the guts to stand by this country...not some...some hedonistic hegemony masquerading as a political party.”

“Sir...” Ghani started to say, only to freeze when the President’s fist slammed into the desk in front of him.

“Minister sahib, your party has tested my patience enough,” the President said leaning forward, with a hint of steel in his voice. “Now go and tell your people my decision.” Even in anger, he kept his voice even. “Let them know that I already have the votes to elect him without your party’s support. It would be nice if Mr. Chaudhry’s own party voted for him as well.”

The doors to the outer office opened with the President’s military escorts flanking both sides. “Now get out of my office,” sneered President Butt.

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He awoke recognizing the room. It had been days since the showdown at the warehouse and Kamal had little to no memory of how he had arrived at the safe house in Islamabad. Kamal tried to move, but the pain shot through his body with a vengeance, causing him to almost lose consciousness again. He stopped moving, breathing heavily through his mouth and gritting his teeth against the pain.

The door to the room opened and someone entered. He couldn’t recognize the figure through the haze that filled his eyes. He felt a burn flow through his arm, overpowering the pain. They had injected him with something, but as the pain subsided, he heard a faint voice calling his name.

“Kamal, Kamal,” the voice said. “Can you hear me?”

Kamal tried to speak, but the days under sedation had parched his throat. He motioned to the glass of water on the table, hoping that the figure would understand that he wanted water. He coughed as he drank, and the water burned going down his raspy throat.

“You need to rest,” the figure said. “You’ve taken a fairly bad beating. The morphine I just gave you should help with that.”

Kamal, undaunted, tried to speak, but rasping sounds instead of words came out of his throat. The morphine took hold and the haze returned to his eyes; he fell back to sleep.

His dreams were filled with conflicting images of his life on the battlefield, the night in the warehouse and his time with Sara. *She must be my happy place*, Kamal thought to himself. As he fell deeper into the drug-induced sleep, his mind wandered.

Training at The Bird’s Nest. Dinner in Islamabad. The mountains of Siachen. The date in Daman-e-Koh. The rooftop in Karachi. *Why am I remembering the rooftop?* The memory persisted in Kamal’s unconscious state. He saw Aftab in the market talking to the *naanwala*. *That bastard would talk to anyone that would listen to him*. He followed Aftab as he moved to the newspaper hawker that supplied our daily connection to the world. The fruit seller who had the worst selection of fresh fruit he had ever seen. Aftab always bought *falsas* from him, most of which were rotten, but never got apples or even a melon that would have lasted longer. His scope followed Aftab beyond the fruit seller to the cigarette *khoka*, another source of sustenance for them. Kamal’s mind froze for a second and tracked back to the fruit seller, now talking to one of the guards of the munitions depo they had hit during the operation. As he focused his scope on the fruit seller, *there is something very familiar about him, but where...?*

Kamal’s eyes snapped open, still semi-under the influence of the morphine. He wasn’t in the safe house, but a hospital with machines connected to his body. *How did I get from the safe house to here? Or was I here the whole time?*

Kamal tried to call out for a doctor or nurse but no one came in. He fumbled around the bed for the call button, pressing it furiously when he found it, but before anyone came in Kamal drifted back to his unconscious state. Maybe the button was for the morphine drip and not to call the hospital staff, he thought to himself.

What seemed like hours later, he opened his eyes again, finding a nurse standing beside him taking his vitals.

“Oh, you’re awake,” she said. “Let me get the doctor.”

She went out the door and Kamal’s eyes closed again.

“Nurse! Doctor!” Kamal called out, but no one came. *Hadn’t the nurse said she was getting a doctor? Where is she?* He fumbled around the bed for the call button, pressing it furiously when he found it. The door to his room opened and a woman in a white coat walked in.

“Captain, nice to see you back with us,” the white coat said, taking the stethoscope from around her neck. “Let me just check your vitals. I’m sure you have questions.” *Yeah, like how did I get here?!?*

She quickly checked his pulse and breathing. “Breathing is a bit labored, but that’s probably because of the cracked ribs,” she said. “Pulse seems fine.”



“I need to speak with my boss,” Kamal croaked painfully, still unsure of where he was. “I have urgent information for him.”

“Your boss? You do realize where you are?” she said, looking into Kamal’s blank eyes. “This is CMH Rawalpindi, Captain. There are no bosses here,” she said laughing. “Do you remember how you got here?”

Kamal searched his drugged mind for the last memories, but nothing emerged. “How long have I been here?”

“Well, you were at CMH Peshawar for two days. Then transferred on orders from Lt. General Asim Junejo, Director Military Operations,” she explained. “You must be very important to have a Lt. General order your transfer here. And in a private room, no less.”

Kamal’s throat hurt, but he needed to know, “How long have I been here?”

“Total stay has been seven days so far. We expect you to be here for at least another week before you can be released,” she finally told him.

“I need to speak with someone from the army,” Kamal said, grabbing the doctor’s hand. “I have to know what happened.”

“There’s someone waiting outside to speak with you,” she said, heading to the door. “By the way, is Sara your wife? You kept calling her name whenever you woke.”

Sara had been with him at the safe house, or had that been a dream? “Just a woman I dated for a while. No one special,” Kamal whispered. Every word was an effort, and his tongue felt heavy, probably a side effect from the sedation.

The doctor opened the door and motioned to the person waiting outside. A uniformed officer filled the doorframe staring at him. “Captain Kamal Khan?” the officer asked. “Major Umer Afzal, Military Intelligence.” The officer came into the room, and waited politely for the doctor to exit. She did so with a last glance at her patient.

Major Umer walked to Kamal’s bedside, looking at the monitors and wires extending from the bed. “How are you feeling now, Captain?”

“I’m fine,” rasped Kamal. “Who knows I’m here?”

“No one. That’s not something you need to worry about. I do have several questions, however, and it doesn’t look like you’re in a state to talk.”

“I can talk!” But Kamal’s voice had already weakened in the short time he had been up. He decided to sit up, but his body felt heavy. Experimentally, he moved his leg and almost fainted again with the pain. As his face contorted with pain, Major Umer put a hand on Kamal’s shoulder, gently stilling the Captain’s attempts to move.

“Stay still, Captain. I have orders to wait here until you can talk. You don’t need to move to do that.” As Kamal subsided back into the bed, the Major walked quickly outside the room, calling a nurse back in. She readjusted a setting on a machine, and Kamal felt endorphins flood his body as the pain slipped away. His eyes closed as the morphine took effect.

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“...no lasting damage. He’s young and strong and we can expect a full recovery.”

“What about his voice, was his throat also hurt?”

“No, that’s from being asleep for ten days without any water. It’s just dry. I’ll give him something to lubricate his throat, but I don’t want you taxing him, Major.”

Kamal heard the voices come closer, but as he opened his eyes, he realized that the doctor and the Major were standing at the foot of his bed. They hadn’t noticed that he was awake yet, and he preferred it that way as he listened to the doctor list his injuries. Broken ribs, bruised kidneys, and a hairline fracture on his wrist. His thigh was sore from the bullet wound, but was healing nicely. *Yeah, right*, thought Kamal as he flexed his leg muscles and felt the pain radiate up to his stomach. They were most concerned with the blow to his head. His eye was still swollen, a worrying sign, apparently, because while x-rays and MRI’s hadn’t shown any fractures or lasting damage, they had expected the swelling to have gone down by now.

Kamal moved involuntarily at that, and the doctor and Major stopped talking. Kamal opened his eyes. The doctor smiled at him, coming round to the head of the bed. She called for a nurse.

“Afternoon, Captain. Are you feeling better today?”

Kamal nodded. “Much better.” He looked at the Major, still standing at the foot of the bed. “I need to talk, now.”

The Major nodded. “We’re just getting you some cough syrup and water for your throat.”

Minutes later, Kamal’s throat liberally coated with cough syrup, he was finally alone with the Major.

“Captain, we need to understand what happened that night in Peshawar,” Major Umer said, pulling a chair from the corner. He sat down at his bedside and opened his briefcase to remove a file. “There are conflicting stories about what happened in the days leading up to the night in question. We’re just trying to assemble all the facts. What do you remember?”

“Shouldn’t I be speaking to an ISI representative?” Kamal asked.

“Don’t worry Captain, I’ve been read in,” Major Umer replied. “Either way, we report to the same people and I’m sure that the ISI will be sending someone along. I have notified them that you’re awake now.”

“I can only remember a few things. The bulk of that night is still unclear to me.” Kamal wanted some information himself. “First, how is Kaleem? He was taken by these people.”

“Kaleem? Oh, the man you passed off as a friendly to the FC?” the Major said. “He

seems to be recovering well. Let's get to the business at hand. What can you recall?"

Relieved that Kaleem had survived, Kamal shifted in his bed, trying to get a more comfortable position. "Sir, they took him. I tracked him to an abandoned warehouse in Hayatabad Industrial Estate," Kamal paused, taking a breath as he finally settled into a comfortable position. It was a relief to be able to talk clearly again. "I watched the warehouse for three to four days, gathering intelligence on force strength and patterns of movement. The day that I chose to breach, I went during an evening guard change," Kamal explained. "There were two guards outside and three inside. I think I knocked three out and neutralized two."

"You neutralized *all* of them," the Major's tone was dry. Kamal furrowed his brow. He didn't think that he'd killed the first two guards, but then...He shrugged painfully, and continued.

"Inside the hall, there were two men. I had changed into the second guard's uniform, so I managed to catch both of them off guard, but the second one gave me this." He gestured to his eye, still swollen and painful. "I had to kill him. That alerted Faheem and..."

"Wait, Faheem?"

"FC officer."

"Hold on," the Major said. "Are you telling me that an FC officer was behind this whole thing?"

"I thought you already knew this," Kamal answered, confused. "It seems a little odd that the FC would be providing security for a normal citizen who had kidnapped someone, doesn't it?"

The Major shook his head in disbelief, reaching into his briefcase to pull another file. He read the contents, shaking his head even more.

"You want to tell me what's in the file, Major?" Kamal asked.

"I think we have some problems here that will have be discussed in more detail with the Chiefs," the Major replied. The cryptic nature of his answer caused concern and confusion with Kamal.

"Sir," Kamal politely said. "I have been through hell already. I really don't want to sit through a debrief answering uncomfortable questions about things I know nothing about."

The Major glanced over his bifocals at Kamal and smiled. "Let me put it this way," he said. "The debrief is going to be explosive."

## CHAPTER 14

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And on the fifteenth day, the President rejoiced.

Personally, he hated the backdoor political gamesmanship that is Pakistani politics, yet when forced, he was more adept than those who had been playing for years. He had used his corporate experience to leverage every political leader into doing what he wanted. Sure, he had made back channel promises, but as an independent President, his actions were seen as preventive measures against possible constitutional showdowns between two branches of the federal government.

In Pakistan, the president is much like the queen of England. He's there, but holds no powers under the constitution over the elected government. Well, no powers other than being able to dissolve the sitting government with the stroke of his pen. This time, he had done what other Pakistani presidents had never done — orchestrated a coup d'état within the democratic system.

"Congratulations, President Butt," said the US Ambassador Annie Parker. "You did well to keep Pakistan's democracy on track."

"Thank you, Madam Ambassador," the President replied, standing to shake her hand. "It was with the support of our international partners that we were able to salvage this. There are always wolves at the door in Pakistan," he added with a smile.

He made a mental note to wash his hands with bleach when the ceremony was over. The US Ambassador was the biggest double dealer in the diplomatic Corps, using every enticement to sway politicians away from Pakistan's national interests. He had heard from Jaffer Shah that she had approached him a few days ago to recommend a more 'favorable' name for prime minister instead of Ahsan Chaudhry. This, sadly, was not new strategy for the Americans. They were like the street pimps that their urban cities were famous for producing. Buy, bully or beat the local talent into working for them. Parker was one of the best, promising favors, approach and even citizenship to those willing to sit at the feet of her masters.

"I do hope that you will join us at President House later for the reception, Madam Ambassador," the President cordially said, with a forced smile. Relations between the two had never been cordial, far from it.

"I wouldn't miss it," she replied moving down the aisle.

"Bitch," the President murmured as she passed to her seat on the other side of the gallery. She smiled at the President as she sat down. The President returned her smile, turning it into a sneer as his face turned away.

The hall erupted with applause as Ahsan Chaudhry entered from the room where he awaited the vote tabulation. His party faithful, who just four days ago stood opposed to

his nomination, rallied around him as he made his way to the seat reserved for the leader of the National Assembly. He turned and waved to the gallery and the members on both sides of the aisles before taking his seat to await the announcement.

“Order! Order!” the Speaker of the National Assembly called, pounding his gavel against the table. “There will be order in this house.” The house members seemed to disregard his command, but as the pounding continued, they begrudgingly returned to their seats and the noise slowly fell to hushed silence.

“Honorable members of parliament, distinguished guests and respected heads of state, I am honored to welcome you to this session of the National Assembly,” said Tariq Nadeem. “Fourteen days ago, Pakistan lost its prime minister to the bullet of an assassin, bringing great sadness to the entire nation. Today, we are honored to be able to announce the unanimous election of our new prime minister, a long-standing and loyal member of the Muslim League, Mr. Ahsan Chaudhry,” Nadeem paused as the hall filled with applause.

“Mr. Prime Minister elect,” Nadeem continued. “The floor is yours.” Nadeem was the most angered by Chaudhry’s election. He had married Azam Shah’s ugly duckling of a daughter to secure his path to the party leadership and eventually, the prime minister’s chair. With Azam Shah gone, he expected to be the party nominee to replace him, only to have the party leadership supplant Ahsan Chaudhry in his place.

The Prime Minister-elect stood up to thunderous applause. Again, he turned, acknowledging the audience and guests. To his left sat Jaffer Shah, the former deputy speaker, now the Prime Minister’s chief political advisor. The kingmaker sat smug, knowing that he had once again seated the king of his choice and he had been richly rewarded with the spoils from the kingdom. He was the first to stand, bringing the audience to their feet to join him.

“Mr. Speaker...Mr. Speaker...” Chaudhry repeated trying to calm the house. The Speaker slammed his gavel down bringing the house volume down again. The Prime Minister-elect took a drink from the glass under his podium, waiting for silence to return to the house.

“Mr. Speaker, Mr. Chairman, honorable members of Parliament, President Butt, distinguished guests and respected heads of state, *Assalaam-a-laikum*,” Chaudhry began. “Today, we are honored to gather together, first to honor the former Prime Minister Azam Shah and his sacrifice for the people and nation of Pakistan and secondly, to complete the constitutional and democratic process to fill the vacated seat that I have been honored with.” Chaudhry paused as the hall filled with applause again.

“I want to tell my fellow Pakistanis that today is the beginning of a new Pakistan. A Pakistan that sustains itself without international loans; a Pakistan that no longer tolerates corruption on any level for any amount; a Pakistan that defends its citizens equally, not

based on wealth or position. And finally, a Pakistan that, when we achieve all these things, will be populated by citizens proud to call themselves Pakistanis,” the Prime Minister said, followed by another round of thunderous applause.

President Butt was not surprised by anything that Chaudhry was saying. His speechwriters had prepared the entire speech under his guidance. Mr. Chaudhry would now be a pawn in the President’s game to right the sinking ship and remove the pirates. And he *would* right the ship.

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Kamal had finally been released from the hospital to recover at the safe-house. *Nothing has changed since my last stay here other than the bounty on my head from the Sheikh.* His movements would be more controlled; security within the perimeter of the boundary walls was heightened and a doctor was moved into the safe-house for his continued treatment. Kaleem’s condition after Faheem’s intensive interrogation meant that no one was taking chances with Kamal’s safety.

Kamal spent most of the day inside the house, avoiding any risk of exposure. He was free to leave the house at night, as long as the lights along the boundary wall were off. It was his only respite from the mini-prison that caged him. Within a few days of moving, he returned to the ‘normal’ routine for a protectee, with the inclusion of a demanding physical therapy schedule. He had formed a casual friendship with the doctor, giving him someone to talk to in the long daylight hours. What he hadn’t been told was that that doctor’s mission included, other than facilitating his quick mental recovery, a detailed extraction of as much information as he could from Kamal.

It was early one Islamabad morning, a week after his release from the hospital, before the sun had climbed from its slumber in the Margalla Hills, that Kamal was spirited out of the house into a blacked-out car in the driveway. He looked into the rearview mirror from the backseat and recognized the eyes staring back at him.

“It’s been a while, soldier,” Kamal said with a smile. “How are you?”

“Sir, I’m fine. Thank you,” he replied. “You don’t look as well as last time.”

“Slip and fall accident,” Kamal said laughing.

“Looks like the fall was a bad one,” the soldier said, smiling in the mirror.

“You have no idea,” Kamal replied, shaking his head. “No idea,” he repeated, voice trailing away as his mind slipped back to that night in the warehouse.

“We’re just waiting for the other vehicles to get in position,” the soldier said. “Two minutes and we move.”

Kamal nodded his head, not consciously registering anything that had just been said to him. The vision danced in his mind of the guards falling one by one as he engaged them

until the radio squelch pulled him back from the warehouse to the car again.

“Comms check,” the driver said taking the walkie-talkie in his hand. “Identify and report positions.” In quick succession, five drivers called out their call-signs and locations, confirming they were in position.

“We’re ready to move out,” the driver said, looking in the rearview mirror at Kamal.

“Let’s go,” Kamal replied, fighting the demons in his head.

The car moved out of the driveway and turned toward the F-10 market where the convoy grew. Kamal sat quietly in the back as five vehicles pulled from their parked positions and joined ahead of and behind his own. Counter-surveillance, he thought to himself as the lush green of Islamabad faded away and his mind painted the picture of the barren, mountainous view to each side of the road in Timergara. *How had he gotten there?*

As the cars moved along the road, he watched each of them peel off in different directions drawing any potential lurkers and watchers with them. As his vehicle moved closer to a police checkpoint, Kamal’s eyes saw the FC soldier that had checked his identification, and expected to stop, but the driver pulled straight through. He glanced back a few times seeing the same black Corolla that he was in behind him, but there were times when he glanced in the rearview mirror only to see a double-door pickup in the shadows. *Was his mind really this confused?* The car raced down the turnpike and onto the Islamabad Highway headed back towards Islamabad. *Where had he been if not the safe house* The car shot through the city and in the gates of ISI headquarters as Kamal’s mind returned to the reality of Islamabad.

The car pulled around to the familiar security door and stopped. Kamal entered, hobbling to the elevator, not bothering to stop for the cursory security check. *The driver can take care of that.* An escort tried to board the elevator with him, but Kamal held out his hand stopping him. “I know where I’m going,” he said as the elevator doors closed between the two.

Kamal took a deep breath, trying to bring his fractured mind into focus. How would he handle a debriefing with so much confusion? He tried to collect his thoughts as the elevator moved up the floors, but found himself questioning his own version of events. Before the doors opened on the fourth floor, Kamal shifted his weight from the back wall where he was leaning and grabbed his crutch. The injuries caused him to move slower than the elevator door, forcing him to jam the crutch between them as they closed, triggering them open again. He pulled back the crutch, slotting it under his left shoulder and limped out.

Pausing at the end of the hallway, he drank in the environment, trying to settle his mind and draw all his energy for the long hobble down the corridor to the conference room, but his mind could only see the corridor in the Imam’s home. He had already passed the security door downstairs, but the ever-present cameras kept watch on anyone in the

corridor. He dreaded the distance from the elevator to the conference room. *This is the longest trek I've had to make since the hospital*, as he put the crutch forward and swung his weight to start moving down the hall.

Traveling down the corridor, Kamal's forehead beaded with sweat. The exertion was more than he was accustomed to. His mind still stumbled between the Imam's house and where he now stood. *This is the room where we waited for the evening festivities*, he thought standing outside the reinforced wooden door. That image shattered when he looked across the hall at the plaque outside another door. 'Dr. Sara Ahmed' read the inscription. *What the fuck is wrong with me? Should I stop and say hello?* He hovered for a moment debating, regaining some strength before continuing down the corridor. *Now isn't the time. My mind isn't clear enough and she'll have too many questions.* Moments later, he found himself finally at the door. The guards reached for the handles to pull it open for him, but Kamal stopped them.

"Let me settle myself first," he said, taking a handkerchief from the back pocket of his uniform pants and wiping the sweat from his face and neck. He adjusted his shirt, checking to make sure the perspiration had not bled through, looking to one of the guards for approval. The guard looked him up and down and gave him a thumbs-up signal, before snapping the door to the conference room open.

Kamal stood in the doorway feeling as naked as a newborn as silence greeted him from within. He shifted his weight to his one good leg and snapped off a salute to the officers sitting around the ornately decorated table. There were flowers at both ends with another bouquet in the center. A tea service was before each of the men around the table with a fresh setting at his assigned seat. He recognized many of the occupants of the chairs, but there were a couple of new faces that he hadn't seen before. At least, he didn't recall seeing before.

Lt. General Misbah Qadir pulled a cigarette from the pack of imported Dunhills and tapped the butt on the table. Kamal tracked the movement as if in slow motion, the taps echoing in his head like gunfire. The general dropped his cigarette on the table and looked sternly at Kamal.

"Do you plan on sitting down, Captain?" he said, picking the cigarette back up between his thumb and forefinger to place it between his dry, chapped lips. Kamal was frozen in place as the lighter was raised and the flame exploded from its nib. The tip of the cigarette drank up the flame, glowing red with its heat. The general exhaled the smoke, asking, "Unless you feel strong enough to stand throughout the debrief?"

Kamal was visibly confused by the general's aggressive tone. *I haven't done anything wrong. I only fought to get an asset free to save the mission.* But the tone made the hairs on Kamal's arm stand up. *This is not going to be an easy debrief.* He squared his shoulders and limped to his place at the table.



With Kamal finally in his seat, the General sat forward and pulled a microphone towards him. He reached across the table and took a remote in his hand, pointing at the camera in the corner of the room that Kamal had noticed in his last debrief. *This time, the red light is on.*

“I now call this debrief of Captain Kamal Khan to order on this the 14th day of June 1996. Present are Lt. Gen. Asim Junejo, Director General, Military Operations; Brigadier Ahmed Saeed, Director General, Military Intelligence; Brigadier Imtiaz Riaz, Director General, Frontier Constabulary; Major Umer Afzal, Investigator, Military Intelligence; Captain Kamal Khan, and myself, Lt. General Misbah Qadir, Director General, Inter Services Intelligence,” he said into the microphone.

“The purpose of this debriefing is to understand the actions and activities leading up to, and including, the attempted kidnapping and interrogation of a deep cover ISI operative.” He looked around the room at all the participants to see if there was anything else that needed to be added. “Gentlemen, let’s begin.”

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His seat was comfortable in the first class section of the Islamabad-bound Emirates flight. He had flown by private jet to Dubai, where he spent time with his wife and children before boarding this flight. But his wife and children were forgotten when looking at the beautiful twenty-three-year-old Emirati sitting next to him. Ahdad was a journalist for Al-Jazeera traveling to Pakistan to interview the newly elected Prime Minister for her channel. They had met in a chance encounter in the Duty Free shop, reaching for the same Tom Clancy spy thriller. The interaction was quick but cordial, and he was surprised to find her in the seat next to him when she boarded.

“Hello Dave!” she exclaimed as she slid by him into her seat, leaving the aroma of her perfume lingering in the air.

“Hello Ahdad,” he said. “I didn’t know you would be sitting next to me. What a pleasure!”

“At least I’ll enjoy the flight there,” she laughed, rocking her head to the side, and smiled. “Not so sure about how much I’ll enjoy Islamabad,” she said, taking her phone from her purse to check messages.

“Is this your first time to Pakistan?” Dave asked, surprised that an Emirati journalist had never been there before.

“Yes, I just completed my internship and my new boss said this would be a good experience,” she replied.

“You just completed your internship and you’re interviewing the Prime Minister?” Dave asked, a bit stunned that such an opportunity was being given someone so new.

“No,” she laughed. “I’m just there to arrange the meeting and get background for the interviewer. They don’t waste their time with these small things,” she said with a wink.

The air hostess came around and asked them both, “Please buckle your seat belts. We are getting ready for takeoff.”

“Excuse me,” Dave called. “When we get airborne, could you bring my friend and I something to drink?”

“Yes sir,” the air hostess said over her shoulder as she walked down the aisle.

Within minutes, the flight was in the air and the air hostess returned with a pleasant smile on her face. “What can I get you to drink?”

“I’ll have a scotch on the rocks please,” Dave said. “Ahdad, what about you?”

“I really shouldn’t,” Ahdad said with a smile, “but what the heck, I’ll sleep better tonight. I’ll have a whiskey and coke please.”

The air hostess smiled, “I’ll be right back with your drinks.”

“So, where are you coming from, Dave?” Ahdad asked.

“Canada via London,” said Dave.

“Oh, I love Canada!” Ahdad said smiling. “I’ve been to Toronto, Montreal and Whistler Mountain to ski.”

“Not Niagara?” Dave asked with a smile. “Everyone finds their way there when they visit Canada.”

“No,” she replied sheepishly. “I don’t want to go there until I have someone to enjoy it with. But hey, that’s me. Why are you traveling to Pakistan?”

“I work for a mineral exploration company and we are looking at working with a Pakistani company to mine marble from the NWFP,” Dave said.

“Wow! Really?” Ahdad replied. “Wouldn’t it be expensive to transport marble from Pakistan to Canada?”

“We’re not going to transport to Canada,” Dave said laughing. “We are looking to source it for builders in the Middle East and Europe.”

The rest of the flight was filled with small talk and flirtation from both sides. She was obviously someone who knew how to use her femininity to get what she wanted and put someone at ease. As they approached Islamabad, the captain’s voice came across the intercom.

“Ladies and gentleman, we are just about to land at Islamabad International Airport, where the temperature is a balmy thirty-two degrees Celsius. Local time is 1:45 am. We should be at the terminal in the next fifteen minutes,” he said. “If you could all please fasten your seat belts and return your seats to an upright position, we should be all clear to land. On behalf of myself and the cabin crew, we’d like to thank you for flying Emirates Airlines and look forward to seeing you onboard again soon. Cabin crew, please take your seats for landing.”

The cabin crew made a quick check of the passengers, made the final preparations for landing and took their seats as the plane leaned hard to its right adjusting its position for the runway. The plane touched the ground minutes later, the wheels passing the impact of the touchdown into the cabin of the plane as it landed. True to his word, the Captain had the plane at the terminal in fifteen minutes and passengers were stepping into the aisles to collect their things from the overhead baggage compartments.

Dave rose from his seat and pulled his briefcase from the overhead compartment. With a quick smile and goodbye, he left Ahdad and made his way to the exit. *She was interesting company, but not someone that I really want to know beyond this flight*, he thought exiting the plane onto the airport tarmac and onto the waiting bus. Islamabad International wasn't like other airports. The size of the airport was not much larger than the bus stations back home and there were no walkways into the terminals. Here, passengers exited the plane into the humid air to board buses that would take them to the terminal and immigration and passport control.

As he stepped out of the bus into Immigration, he was confronted with the passengers of two other international flights that had landed in the past twenty minutes. True to its bus station form, there were only two passport control officers to deal with over four hundred passengers, while three others stood to the side watching the lines backup with the influx of more international passengers. He stood in line, wiping the sweat from his forehead with one hand and travel documents in the other. It seemed that one of the three officers realized it would be early morning before the backlog was cleared, and there were five more incoming international flights within the next ninety minutes.

"All passengers with foreign passports, please step over to counter five," he called. "All passengers with business visas, please step to counter four." Another man came over and whispered something in his ear, causing him to laugh. "All those passengers with first class boarding passes, please step to counter three," he said, as the two long lines disbursed into five much more manageable lines. Dave had found his place three people back in the first class line, waiting for the passport control officer to clear the two before him.

"Next," he finally called.

"Good morning," Dave said stepping up to the counter, only to be met with a stoic face and an even grimmer attitude.

"Travel documents please," the man said without showing any interest. *I bet he'll show interest when Ahdad gets up here*. "Where you are coming from?"

"Canada," said Dave, watching him flip through the pages of his passport looking for his business visa to Pakistan. He stopped a few times on visas of other countries, glancing up to look at the man before him. "Is this your first visit to Pakistan?"

"No, third," Dave replied, as the passport officer found his visa and searched for proof of the other entries into the country.

“What business brings you to Pakistan, Mr...Andrews?” he asked seeing a couple of stamps from Pakistani immigration. He reached over and took his stamp in hand, waiting for the answer to his question.

“Mineral exploration in the NWFP,” Dave replied. “We are working with a Pakistani company to export marble to the Middle East and Europe.”

The passport control officer’s blank eyes looked at him, seemingly not understanding what he had just said, and stamped the passport, handing it back to him.

“Thank you,” Dave said collecting his documents, only to be answered with a loud, “Next!”

He quickly passed through the baggage claim area, having nothing to collect and moved through customs with a cursory check of his laptop and briefcase. Emerging into the humidity of the midnight air, he glanced around the crowd of people gathered to collect friends and family for a sign with his name on it. He spotted a dingy man standing in a freshly ironed *shalwar kameez* holding a sign reading “Andrews” on it. He pointed at the man and motioned for him to take his briefcase.

“Welcome sir, the car is waiting here. Please come,” the little man said in his best English, obviously not something he spoke or heard very often. He took the briefcase and rushed ahead, clearing a path for his guest to the waiting vehicle. Dave casually followed behind, doing his best to keep the little man in his sight as he moved through the crowd of people. He finally found his way out of the crowd to the drop lane outside the terminal and the waiting Mercedes with the little, dingy man standing next to the door.

“Please take seat,” he said, opening the door. He felt the cool air hit his skin as he neared the vehicle. Air-conditioned, he thought gratefully, as he slid into the back seat and the door closed behind him.

“Welcome to Pakistan, Mr. Andrews,” a voice said from within the car.

He turned his head to see his old friend sitting comfortably next to him, cigar in hand. “Or should I say General el-Yahad?” he said with a smile.

“Abbas is fine,” he replied laughing. “I’m just glad that my contact in Switzerland was able to get such convincing travel documents for me on short notice.”

“I don’t think that anyone would say no to you, Abbas,” the other man said laughing. “You carry a bit too much power with you.”

They both laughed at the statement.

“You’ll be staying with me tonight in Islamabad and we will travel tomorrow morning,” the man said. “Don’t worry, we have all the comforts of home ready for you there.”

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“Do you see the problem that we’re facing, Captain?” Lt. General Junejo asked. “The Brigadier provides a narrative that says you killed, with cold-blooded devastation, six of his men and put a gun to his head. Both punishable under a court martial and death sentence,” he paused to pull a second file from the stack of folders in front of him. Opening the file, he continued, “Your narrative paints a picture of an officer blinded by ambition, who authorized a subordinate to kidnap your asset luring you out for capture. Knowing full well that they were interfering in an active long-term ISI operation,” he closed the file and looked up at Kamal. “Why should we believe you over the Brigadier?”

Kamal had spent the past four hours listening to and answering questions about the Peshawar warehouse. With several mugs of tea and biscuits in his stomach, and a quick, discreet painkiller, he had relaxed considerably and managed to organize his thoughts. As a result, the one thing that Kamal had not done throughout the debriefing was refer to anything in the files. He recounted all the details of the events from his own memory. Now, with the General posing this question, Kamal wondered if attacking the Brigadier would be a feasible strategy. His entire testimony had been factual, matching everything that he had said in the hospital when Major Umer had questioned him. The Brigadier, on the other hand, had to refer to his files on numerous occasions during the questioning to ‘recollect’ his story. *He’s lying through his teeth.*

“General, you’ve encapsulated my thoughts perfectly,” Kamal started. “If I was on the outside looking at both narratives, I would have my doubts as well. Why believe a captain who has just joined the intelligence services over a brigadier who heads a paramilitary division?” He paused to allow the question to settle in the minds of the officers around the table. “I could remind you of my unblemished service record of ten years in the Army the SSG and now the ISI, compared to a brigadier that was once given the choice of retirement or demotion after seizing the wrong vehicle, again on faulty intelligence, in a drug sting. But that would prove nothing as mistakes are inevitable when based on bad decisions or flawed intelligence. No, that’s not why you should believe me over the Brigadier, sir,” he said calmly. He had reminded the entire room that the Brigadier had a history of faulty judgments based on questionable intelligence, and his voice gained strength as he continued.

“How can I prove my innocence against the Brigadier’s charges?” Kamal asked. “I cannot.” The committee members sat forward in their chairs, a little stunned that Kamal might be admitting that the Brigadier’s statements carried weight. “But you can, with the files of testimony and evidence that you have before you,” Kamal continued. “Other members of the intelligence services have raised questions about the effectiveness of the Frontier Constabulary under the Brigadier’s command in the Bajaur and Dir districts. You have proof of a jihadi training camp in full operation just a few kilometers from an FC command post. You have both my asset’s and my own medical reports detailing the

injuries inflicted by FC soldiers under the Brigadier's command. You have the reports of both MI & the ISI stating that the Brigadier was informed and categorically told to desist from any attempts to capture and interrogate either of us, as it would compromise an ongoing ISI investigation. And you have the Brigadier, who disregarded all these warnings, risking the life of an ISI operative and the outcome of the greater mission to neutralize that jihadi camp," Kamal continued in a calm, even tone, never losing the General's gaze as he emphatically made each point.

"You already have all the evidence you need to separate fact from fiction, sir," Kamal said, turning his eyes to the Brigadier. "This is not my word against the Brigadier's. This is the entire intelligence community's word against the Brigadier's word. I can only put my trust in Allah Almighty that this committee will take the right decision."

"Captain," interjected Brigadier Ahmed Saeed. "Do you believe that the FC is working with the leaders of the jihadi camp?"

"Sir, it's not what I believe that matters," Kamal said quietly. He knew where this was going, but he was fairly certain he'd already convinced the people who mattered. He could see the change of attitude in the general body language of the members, with one or two exceptions. "It's what the evidence shows."

"Is that a yes, Captain?" the Brigadier asked again.

"Sir, that is a yes."

"Do you understand the implications of the charges that you're making, Captain?" asked Lt. General Junejo.

"I would expect that they're no less severe than the implications of the charges being made against me, sir," Kamal replied. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the Brigadier's face flush with anger. *Here it comes*, he thought.

"This is absolute bullshit!" the Brigadier barked, slamming his fist down on the table. "He has no proof of what he's saying. Not a shred of proof."

"The Brigadier is right. Captain Kamal does not have any proof," said Lt. General Misbah Qadir, breaking his long silence, having grown tired of the charade that was being played out before him. "I have the proof, as does every member of this committee, and Brigadier," he said, turning his harsh, battle-worn eyes to him, "it is damning." The Brigadier tried to object, but Misbah stopped him cold. "Before you continue, I have a few questions...for my own clarity."

"The name, rank and posting of the person that provided your intelligence about Kamal and Kaleem," the General asked, his voice unwavering.

"It wasn't Kamal that I was told about," the Brigadier said. "I was told Dawood."

"Name, rank and posting, Brigadier," the General asked again, more forcefully.

He didn't hesitate. He didn't like the General's tone. "Commander Faheem, Bajaur Command."

“What intelligence did he give you?”

“Dawood and Kaleem were behind the assassination of Prime Minister Azam Shah.”

A sudden hush fell across the room and all eyes turned toward him. The General stopped writing and looked up, visibly shocked. “Repeat that. I want to make sure that everyone hears you clearly.”

“Sir...Commander Faheem approached me in Peshawar stating that he had...credible...information that Dawood and Kaleem were part of the...the assassination of the Prime Minister,” the Brigadier stammered. Under the spotlight in a way that hadn’t happened throughout the meeting, he could feel heat rising up his collar, and beads of sweat forming under his receding hairline.

“And you felt the FC alone was able to handle this information, as well as capture the two people identified, without bringing military intelligence or the ISI on board?” Brigadier Ahmed Saeed asked, slowly enunciating each word, but before Brigadier Imtiaz could continue, Saeed asked a follow-up question. “Did you pass this information up the chain of command for confirmation or investigation?”

“Brigadier sahib, I visited both the MI and ISI station chiefs in Peshawar,” the Colonel said. His voice had become slightly pitchy. “They tried to convince me to stay out of the matter due to an on-going ISI investigation, which made me believe that I had credible intelligence.”

“And what did you do, Imtiaz?” Lt. General Junejo asked.

“Er...nothing sir, I had already given approval to take both men down based on the previous intelligence,” he replied, fidgeting in his seat.

“Did you ever take Faheem or his source to the MI or ISI station chiefs?” asked Lt. General Misbah.

“No sir.”

“Did you meet his source or verify the intelligence independently? You have an entire command post in Bajaur to work with, not to mention the Army post on the border.”

“No sir. I accepted Faheem’s intelligence to be correct, as it has been in the past.”

“Where is Faheem now, Imtiaz?”

“Bajaur Command post, sir.”

The General looked around the room, taking in the expressions of the men seated with him. He had just admitted to violating the basic protocols of military investigations, and it was clear to everyone in the room.

“The FC is not an investigative force, they are specifically for policing,” the Lt. General said. “If you had intelligence, it should have been passed to the MI or ISI for further investigation prior to any action being taken. You didn’t do that and I’m having a hard time understanding why right now, but this can all be clarified easily.”

“Umer,” the General said, looking to his trusted investigator. “I want Faheem here

before the sun breaks over Margalla Hills day after tomorrow. But I don't want anyone to know why."

"Sir?" the Major asked, confused as to how he could bring someone in without telling anyone why.

"Contact the base commander at our checkpoint on the border," the General said. "Let him know that I want this Commander Faheem escorted to Nowshera by our forces. Make sure that he takes away any communications devices he may have. You will take my chopper and meet them there."

The Major furiously scribbled in his black leather sheathed notepad, one that Kamal had gotten quite familiar with during meetings with his visitors in Peshawar. Umer would glance up every few seconds to see if the General had any additional instructions. "What do I do with him, sir?" the Major asked when the General stopped speaking.

"Take him to the Center and lock him in a cell," the General seethed. "And Umer, again, no one tells him where he is going or why. Understood?"

"Sir, yes sir!"

The General then turned back to the Imtiaz, who had slunk down in his chair and looked like he finally understood the extent of his blunder. "I can't decide, Imtiaz," the General said.

"Can't decide what General?"

"I can't decide if you are the stupidest person in Pakistan or just so incompetent at your job that we should take you out back and shoot you," the General said rising from his chair. He moved around the table, making his way closer to the Brigadier, continuing, "In my thirty plus years of service for this country, I have never seen anyone botch something this badly. It's a clusterfuck! And you alone are to blame for it."

"Sir, I only followed the intelligence," Imtiaz's voice cracked as the General hovered over his seat.

"Imtiaz, let's be honest with each other. You didn't follow any intelligence. You followed your ambitions," the General said placing his mammoth hands on his shoulders. He cringed under the weight of those hands. "Your only salvation is if Faheem admits to his double game."

The General stepped back and gazed around the table, looking into each committee member's eyes, at times looking through the person in the chair. His gaze finally settled on Kamal, who shifted uncomfortably in his seat. It had been a long debrief, and his ribs were aching from holding his spine up for so long.

"Captain, you're dismissed until eleven hundred hours tomorrow morning," he said. "Guards!"

The door to the room swung open quickly and the two men standing outside filled the doorway. "Please assist the Captain back to his vehicle," the General said.



As the guards helped him out of the chair, Kamal could feel the sweat dripping down his back. Kamal was grateful to have been spared the General's wrath, although he knew that it was just beginning for the men who were still in the conference room. The confrontation would be a different kind as he would come face to face with the man who had tried to kill his friend and him. Faheem had escaped then. *I'll make sure that he doesn't escape now.*

## CHAPTER 15

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The hardest part is over, Kamal thought to himself as he moved down the corridor. For the last five hours, he had been examining every aspect of the FC plot to kidnap him. *There is no other way to think of it right now, other than an FC plot.* There was no evidence of his involvement in the Prime Minister's assassination, nor would there ever be, but the accusation had served as the basis for Brigadier Imtiaz's authorization.

He hobbled down the hall, stopping every few feet as the pain medication he had taken earlier began to wear off. The guards had been helpful in getting him up from the chair, but once outside the door, they returned to their posts and Kamal had limped his way back to the elevator on his own. He was halfway down the hall when he finally stopped and leaned against the wall. The pain from his injuries, coupled with complete immobility for five hours, began to cloud his senses. Pulling out his handkerchief, his hand grazed across the pack of Benson & Hedges nestled in his breast pocket.

"Soldier," he called back down the corridor. "Is there somewhere that I can have one of these?" he said shaking the cigarette pack for the guard to see.

The guards both glanced at each other and one made an inaudible comment before the other moved down the hall to Kamal. *Wow, he doesn't look happy with my request,* Kamal thought as the guard neared him.

"Sir, there's a smoking area just around the corner," the guard said, gesturing to the other end of the corridor. "I can escort you there," he said, moving away from Kamal.

"Normally, I wouldn't have an issue going to the smoking areas," Kamal called out to the guard, "but maybe you didn't notice...I'm pretty badly injured and moving to the smoking area would be like walking down a flight of steps for me right now."

The guard stopped and turned back to Kamal, wondering what he would like him to do.

"Look, the last time I was here," Kamal explained, "the guards on duty were kind enough to open an office for me to smoke in. I can't be seen in uniform or at the ISI headquarters, so they made an accommodation for me." He pointed to one of the many offices that lined the corridor. The guard was unimpressed with his request.

"Sir, there is a smoking area that I can take you to," the guard repeated, mechanically. "We have wheelchairs if you are unable to move under your own power, but I can't let you smoke in one of the private offices."

"And I can't be seen outside this building in uniform!" Kamal reiterated for the soldier, as he pushed himself off the wall.

"Sir, I have orders..." the guard started, but a door opened between Kamal and the elevator, and the guard stopped to see where the interruption came from.

From the door emerged the one person that Kamal didn't want to face right now. She seemed to not notice the other people in the corridor as she quickly pulled the door closed behind her and used her keys to lock it. Turning her head, she saw the two of them standing about twenty feet down the corridor. *It doesn't look like our faces registered with her*, he thought as she turned and started towards the elevator. But something must have clicked, because she turned and marched back in their direction.

"Kamal?" she asked.

"Hello Sara," Kamal answered. "How are you?"

Sara looked at the broken soldier before her, and he caught a fleeting look of shock and concern. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Classified," Kamal replied jokingly.

"Classified?" she said, with anger in her voice. They had spent a great deal of time talking to each other during Kamal's last visit to headquarters. "Is that...what the..." She fumed, paused, and Kamal could almost see the smoke rising. "Fuck you and your classified," she said.

"Sara..." Kamal called, as she turned to walk away. "Can you stop and listen for a minute?"

"Sorry Kamal," Sara replied without missing a step, "I'm not cleared for classified information."

The guard hid his amusement at the response, but Kamal wasn't amused at all. He gathered up the remaining energy in him and hobbled his way down the corridor until he caught up with her.

"It was a joke, Sara," Kamal said, as he caught up with her at the elevator, out of breath and wincing in pain. "I didn't want to say anything in front of the guard." The ping from the elevator was loud.

The doors to the elevator opened and she stepped in, not answering his clarification. "Aren't you headed downstairs?" she asked as she turned to hit the button on the elevator. Kamal jammed his crutch into the elevator doors as they began to close, forcing them open again.

"Yes, I am."

"Then maybe you should get in," she said with a smile.

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It wasn't unusual for soldiers to be roaming around Timergara bazaar. Actually, it was quite a common occurrence, Faheem thought as a faded green pickup swept past him. From the border post, there were only two markets, Khar and Timergara, where any supplies could be obtained outside the military supplies that came twice monthly. The

Khar bazaar was often where basic supplies were purchased, anything else required a trip to Timergara. But today, there seemed to be more uniformed personnel than usual.

It had been almost two months since Peshawar, but it had been anything but peaceful for Faheem. After his escape from the warehouse, he had passed information through a trusted source to the compound before assuming his uniformed duties again. The message had been simple, nondescript, "It's done," but questions plagued his mind and troubled his sleep. *Kaleem was dead, but what about Dawood? Did the FC get him or had he managed to escape somehow?* One question troubled him more than any other — *how was one man able to do such damage to six highly trained soldiers?* That all changed fifteen days ago when Brigadier Imtiaz called him, furious.

"What the hell did you get me into?" the Brigadier yelled into the phone.

"Sir?"

"Who told you about Dawood and Kaleem?" the Brigadier asked, almost screaming into the receiver.

"Sir," Faheem replied. "It was talk between two known Afghanis in the Khar bazaar. We have been watching them since."

"So you could find them...produce them in front of me if needed?"

"Without a problem, sir," Faheem said self-assured. "Just tell me when and where."

"Good," the Brigadier said, calming down. There was a pause and then he asked a question that shook Faheem even today when he thought of it. "The boy in the chair... have you seen him recently?"

"Sir, Kaleem died during the interrogation," Faheem said, letting his mind return to that night and the memory of the limp body in the chair.

"He wasn't dead when we took him to CMH," the Brigadier answered. "And he disappeared from there soon after." Faheem's mind ruptured. *Was he still alive? Where the fuck had he disappeared to? He was dead when I left him and Dawood was beaten like a dog, possibly hit by the bullets I had fired.* He calmed himself, slowing his heartbeat before he answered the Brigadier.

"I can ask around, but he has not been seen or heard of since then," Faheem said, mind racing, "I can ask where he is buried or when his *janaza* happened."

"No!" the Brigadier yelled. "Stay away from anyone associated with him or Dawood."

"Dawood?" Faheem asked, heart in his throat. "Isn't he dead as well sir?"

There was a long pause again, this time making him uncomfortable. Imtiaz took a deep breath. "I'll be in touch when I need you to bring your sources to Peshawar. Until then, keep your head down."

"Yes, sir."

The past fifteen days had been filled with higher security and darting eyes for him. The nights were sweaty and sleepless, as he replayed the whole thing over and over in his head.

As a result, he now slept with a pistol under his pillow and an extra sidearm under his *kameez* when he was off-duty. And the additional uniformed personnel in the market made him extra cautious and immediately aware of his surroundings.

He made his way across the street to his 1988 Toyota Corolla, plastic bags in his hands. He didn't feel like a watched man. It didn't feel like anything other than a normal day of shopping for his wife and children. Unlocking the door, he smiled at the ice cream vendor where he would come with his children on Sundays. The vendor smiled back and offered him a bottle of Pepsi, but Faheem's mind looked past him at the ten soldiers enjoying themselves inside. Suddenly, he was noticing anyone in a uniform.

"Faheem sahib, Pepsi?" the vendor called to him again.

"No thank you," Faheem said with a smile. "See you Sunday with the kids."

Faheem placed the grocery bags in the backseat and climbed behind the wheel. He paused for a second to recite the *Ayat-ul-Kursi*, as had become his practice fifteen days ago, and turned the key in the ignition. The engine fired up, as it had each day since the call, and he turned onto the road for the trip three kilometers to his home. Two kilometers down the road, the faded green Army pickup cruised past him for the fourth time, pulling to a stop at the dusty road that led to his house. Faheem, disregarding the pickup, turned down the road, kicking dust up with his tires and slammed on the brakes, sliding to a stop when he saw five soldiers blocking the road. A few seconds passed before a soldier appeared on the driver side and knocked on the window. He motioned to Faheem to roll it down. Faheem complied without hesitation.

"Identification please," the soldier stated, glancing in the windows of the car.

"Commander Faheem Khan, Bajaur FC post," Faheem said, as he had always done when stopped at a checkpoint.

"Identification please, Commander," the soldier repeated. Faheem looked at the soldier, realizing that he was not dissuaded by his verbal identification. He took a deep breath and pulled a wad of papers from his chest pocket. Searching, he found his FC service card and handed it to the soldier. "Is there a problem?" he asked handing it over.

The soldier took the card, holding it up to compare the face on the card with the man in the car. "Please step out of the car, Commander." Faheem felt sweat trickle down the back of his neck as he opened the door and stepped out.

"Do you have any weapons on your person?"

"No," Faheem said, immediately realizing that he did. He slowly reached under his *kameez* to pull out the weapon, but the soldiers didn't like the movement, arming and aiming their weapons at him. "Wait!" Faheem said, trying to bring calm back to the situation. "I do have a weapon. I was mistaken," he said, as calmly as he could, continuing to move his hand closer to the weapon. The soldier, unwilling to take the chance of an incident, slammed him against the car and padded him down for the weapon.

“Why did you lie to me?” the soldier asked, withdrawing the weapon from the holster on his waist.

“I didn’t lie. I just forgot,” Faheem said, trying to hold back his anger at the accusation.

“Are there any others?” the soldier asked, jamming his rifle into his back.

“No, that’s the only one.”

“Empty your pockets, Commander,” the soldier said, pulling his rifle from his back.

Faheem looked around at the five AK-47s pointed at him, before slowly reaching into his front and side pockets to remove everything he had in them. The soldier looked at each item that was placed on the hood of the car, sweeping them all up into a satchel.

“You need to come with us,” the soldier said, motioning to the other soldiers.

Faheem hesitated for a moment, looking around at the armed soldiers. His mind raced with the possibilities. *Did they know about the compound and his association? Maybe they found the bank balance that exceeded three hundred times his monthly salary. Could this be about Kaleem and Dawood?* He wanted to ask questions, but knew that he would not find answers here. As he turned to walk with the soldiers, he tossed the keys to the car into the driver’s seat. They were not going to do him any good wherever he was going, he said to himself, climbing into the back of the covered, faded green pickup.

The transport from Bajaur was quicker than he had expected. The army soldiers that picked him up from Timergara bazaar were polite and respectful. The same was not true once they got him to Nowshera. When they handed him over to the base military police, he was shackled and tossed into a cell to await transport. No one would tell him anything about anything, but he could only assume this had something to do with Peshawar.

“Soldier! Guard!” Faheem called out to the men smoking at the door. “What am I doing here?”

The two men glanced over unconcerned with his rantings; one even waved his hand in the air that they couldn’t hear him, before returning to their own conversation. Faheem, angered that he was not getting a response, kicked the cell door causing it to rattle on the hinges. The soldiers turned and strolled over.

“What’s your problem?” the guard yelled, slapping his baton inches from Faheem’s hands making him jerk back quickly.

“What the fuck, soldier?” Faheem yelled at the havildar. “Do they not teach you to respect officers in the army?”

“You’re not an army officer,” the guard sneered back. “And when you’re in the cell, you’re not an officer at all!”

“What was I brought here for? No one has told me anything,” Faheem said, trying to calm his emotions, hoping to get more information with politeness. “I need to know why I’m in a cell.”

“That’s above my pay grade,” the guard replied with a smile. “You’ll have to wait for

the Captain to get here.”

“When does he get here?” Faheem asked, his voice rising in anger at the side step of his question.

The guard turned and started walking away without answering, only to have Faheem holler again, “When does he get here?”

Without breaking his stride, the guard called back, “When he gets here. Now shut the fuck up or we’ll shut you up!”

The comment only infuriated Faheem more. He kicked the cell door again, thinking that it would draw a reaction from the guards again. The guards just kept walking, uninterested in the tantrum behind them.

Faheem spent the next hours alternating between sitting on the rotten wooden bench and pacing in his tiny cell. His mind was racing with possibilities. *I know Kaleem is dead, I killed him. Is that why they picked me up? What about Dawood? Where the hell are they taking me?* Each time someone passed, he would try to drum up some conversation that could get information on why he was there or where he was going. No one stopped or spoke to him, no matter how much noise he made. The silence of the other officers made Faheem more jittery. *Can no one speak here? Why won’t anyone tell me anything? Where the hell is this Captain?*

When the Captain finally arrived, however, he wasn’t interested in answering questions, only asking them.

“Commander Faheem?” Captain Abdul Haleem asked as he approached, flanked by guards on either side. He was flipping pages in a file marked ‘Classified’, looking for something specific in terms of questions he was to ask. The pages of the file didn’t reveal much as most of it had been redacted to protect confidential operation information. He stopped as he reached the cell and looked up. “Of course you are. Who else would you be?”

“Why am I here?” Faheem asked.

“Faheem, you’re on a stopover,” the Captain said. “Someone is in transit to collect you. Don’t know from where or where they are taking you.”

“Can I have some water?” Faheem asked. “I haven’t been given anything to drink since Timergara.” The statement caused the Captain to look up from the file at him. He cocked his head to the side, looking past Faheem into the cell, and motioned to the bucket of water in the corner.

“They gave you something to drink in Timergara?” the Captain asked. “And you’re still alive? Surprising,” he said with a smirk, returning to his file. “I’ve been instructed to ask a few questions,” the Captain said. “Are you allergic to anything?” he asked, pulling his ballpoint pen from his pocket and clicking the top.

“No,” Faheem said. “Can you...” he started to say but the Captain interrupted him.

“Any diseases or illnesses that require medication?” he asked.

“No,” Faheem answered. “Can I...”

“Do you have any heart related issues that we should know about?” the Captain said. His mouth curled up slightly. Faheem didn’t have any heart issues, but that look made his heart stop beating for a second or two.

“No,” Faheem answered again. “Look, I have...”

“Faheem,” the Captain interrupted again. “This will go much easier the sooner you understand that I am not here to answer your questions. I am doing the asking,” he said. “Are we clear on that?” Faheem nodded, understanding that he was in the position he put many others in.

“Now, that we have that clarified,” the Captain continued, flipping pages in the file looking for additional questions that he needed to ask. Finding none, he clicked his ballpoint again and slipped it into his pocket, before turning and moving back toward the door. He handed the file back to the havildar as he passed.

“Captain! Captain!” Faheem hollered. “I need to use the bathroom.”

The Captain’s shoes scuffed against the concrete floor as he stopped, looking up toward the sky for guidance. Faheem could see his shoulders lift and drop, as he took a deep breath before turning around slowly and pointing at the metal bucket in the corner. “I would move the other bucket further away. You don’t want to contaminate your drinking water,” he said with a snide grin, scuffing the soles of his shoes as he started walking again. Faheem turned his head to look at the two buckets in his cell that he had passed multiple times in the past few hours.

*This is my bathroom?*

“Are you kidding me? The FC have better holding cells than these,” he howled at the Captain, who was just turning the corner out of the holding area. “This is bullshit!” No one was listening to his complaints. Or so he thought.

Two guards approached the cell as a third unlocked the door. They rushed in and grabbed Faheem, putting iron shackles around his feet and hands. “The Captain said to give you an outing,” one of the guards said to him, pushing him towards the door. “Move!”

As they walked him out, they would occasionally push and shove him to make him move faster. After walking about half a kilometer, they stopped outside the base farm. The stench of the animals and their filth was not something that the guards were accustomed to and they pulled handkerchiefs from their pockets to cover their noses. The guard grabbed Faheem’s arm and pushed him into the pen with the cattle.

“This is the luxury bathroom that you requested, Commander,” the guard snarled at him. “We hope it meets your exacting FC standards.”

“You want me to shit here?” Faheem asked, rushing back at the guard, only to be met with a baton squarely to the chest, knocking him off balance.



“You have five minutes. Watch out for the bull,” he laughed, pointing to a steer in the corner eyeing Faheem as he stumbled away from the pen door. “He doesn’t like intruders.”

Faheem looked around the pen for a safe place to do his business. He finally spotted a place he thought would be safe enough, and squatted to relieve himself, trying to block out the stench of filth and animals that filled his nostrils. He swatted away each of the cows that came to investigate the intruder, until one decided that he was going to join Faheem and dropped part of a cow pie on his shoe, along with a quick spray of urine that landed on his *kameez*. Knocked off balance by the cow, he dropped his hand into another fresh cow pie to his right and disgust clouded his mind. Gathering himself together, he used the straw in the pen to wipe his hands and himself, and moved towards the door to the pen. The guards held their noses as he neared, commenting loudly, “Oh my God, you smell like shit! Did you roll around in it after you were done?”

Another commented, “Maybe we should bathe...” but the rest of the sentence was lost in the thundering propellers of the two Hueys that passed overhead.

“Looks like your ride is here!” the guard hollered over the noise, grabbing Faheem by the arm and dragging him back to the cell. With the leg irons around his ankles, Faheem was unable to move as quickly as the guards demanded. They kicked and pushed him until finally, frustrated with the pace, clutched him firmly from the arms and legs to carry him back. There would be hell to pay if the transport officers found him out of his cell. The guards tossed him back minutes before the transport team came around the corner to collect him.

Five men, all dressed in black from head to toe, came into the holding area, looking menacing as they approached, eyes focused on the man in the cell. The Captain came around the corner a few seconds later with another man engaged in what looked like a casual conversation. Faheem’s heart raced. *There are no uniforms...who are they handing me over to? Are they even Pakistani?* As they approached, Faheem was able to make out bits of the discussion, and what he heard made the previous hours in Nowshera sound like a vacation.

“Is this him?” the man asked as they neared.

“This is who you asked for, sir,” the Captain replied, handing him the file.

“Why is he still dressed?”

“Did you not want him dressed?” the Captain asked.

The other officer flipped pages in the file, looking for something. Finding it, he slammed the file back into the Captain’s chest. “Read the file next time!”

The captain’s eyes dropped to the file as he pulled it away from his chest. It was there in bold, capital letters — NO CIVILIAN CLOTHING. *How did I miss that?*

“Apologies, sir,” the Captain said. “I missed it.”

The other officer stopped abruptly, biting his lip to contain the words that were fighting to escape. The Captain stopped wondering if he was about to get a dressing down in front of his soldiers and a prisoner. Instead, he reached over and ripped the file from his hands.

“That is why you are military police, Captain,” the officer said. “You don’t understand the obvious,” the officer smiled casually before continuing. “No matter...my boys enjoy helicopter rides — the prisoners, not so much,” he finished as he reached the door of Faheem’s cell.

“Sir, this is your prisoner,” the Captain said.

Major Umer stood at the cell door, gazing in at Faheem, almost examining the prisoner for any marks of abuse. “What the fuck is that smell?”

“Sir, he had an encounter with a cow while using the facilities,” the Captain replied with a smile.

The Major’s head jerked to look at Captain Abdul, “A cow?” he said with surprise. “You couldn’t find a bull for him to play with?” he said, smiling. “We’ll need to clean him up before transport, I don’t want that stench in my chopper.”

“Sir, you could just hang him out the side...” the Captain commented drawing a delighted laugh from the Major.

“No, he could fall,” the Major replied. “How would I explain that to my superiors?”

The Major turned his gaze back to Faheem, holding his hand out for the keys to unlock the door. The Captain motioned to the guard for the keys, who placed them in the Major’s hand. Without hesitation, the Major handed the keys to one of the transport officers asking, “Are the keys to the irons on that?” The guard nodded yes.

“Get him cleaned and dressed for transport,” the Major said, looking at one of the burly men that accompanied him. “I don’t want any shit in my chopper. Having to transport him is enough.”

The Major stepped back from the door and moved around to the side of the cell, his gaze not breaking from Faheem’s eyes the entire time. As he stopped on the right side, he nodded at the transport soldier, and with two words, struck immense fear into Faheem. “Take him.”

As the men rushed in, Faheem tried to struggle from their grasp, but found it impossible inside the four-by-six cell with six men in it. They drove him to the ground and while one man placed a knee on his chest to hold him in place, the others drew their knives and cut the clothing from his body. The man on his chest rose, clutching the irons on his wrist to pull Faheem up and chained him to the bars on the cell.

“Bring the hose! We have to wash the animal before we can transport him,” one of them yelled. With the pressure hose, they rinsed the shit from Faheem’s body along with a portion of his self-respect.

One of the men tossed orange overalls into the cell, yelling, “Get dressed! Quickly You’ve wasted enough of our time,” as he unchained him from the metal bars. Faheem didn’t hesitate pulling on the overalls, hoping that it would restore some of the dignity he had lost to the pressure hose. It did not. Now he looked like a prisoner. As he stepped out of the cell, soaking like a wet dog, they slipped a black bag over his head and led him to the waiting choppers. He could only hope that his next destination would be better than this one. Hope was all he had left.

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The secretary had a habit of arriving an hour before he did to sort, file and deliver all the memos from the previous day’s activities. The memos were the Prime Minister’s source of information to the meetings and calls, briefing him on salient points from each government functionary. Most Prime Ministers didn’t bother to read the actual memos themselves, farming them out to associates and advisors to prepare summaries in the interest of time. That had been the practice in Azam Shah’s Prime Minister house, but wouldn’t be carried forward into Ahsan Chaudhry’s. The new Prime Minister was not ready for underlings reading confidential information no matter how long they had served the party or him.

So it was the secretary’s morning ritual, over a strong cup of Earl Grey tea, to sort all the memos under the Prime Minister’s categorization system. While serving as Interior Minister, Chaudhry spent the majority of his time reading position papers from aides with no actionable information or guidance, so he implemented a system. For the outsider to the office, the folders looked no different than the standard Government of Pakistan emblazoned manila folders, but inside each folder was a colored paper clip attached to the front page that alerted Chaudhry to the importance, or lack thereof, of the information contained within. Only he and the secretary knew the system and when the files were returned to the outer office, the clips were gone. That was their little secret, one of many that could never see the light of day.

When the Prime Minister arrived at his office that morning, Hina was waiting in the lobby to receive him, as she did every morning, with his updated schedule for the day. Hina had joined Chaudhry at the tender age of twenty-two when he was a young Member of Parliament in the Punjab Assembly. It seemed like a lifetime ago, she thought to herself, recounting the fifteen years and three children that had followed him all the way to the Prime Minister House. The Prime Minister’s security detail entered first, followed by Prime Minister Ahsan Chaudhry.

“Good morning, Prime Minister,” Hina said with a smile.

“Good morning, Hina,” the Prime Minister replied jovially. “How does the morning

look?”

“Back to back meetings from ten onwards,” she said, checking her watch. “Just enough time for a cup of coffee and a quick review of the memos,” she said, handing him the schedule to review. For Chaudhry, Hina was more like his personal assistant, overseeing all the affairs that he could not be bothered with remembering. As a result, she was also given her own administrative team that took care of all the tasks that Chaudhry passed on to her, unless otherwise specified. They walked together to his office.

Chaudhry glanced through the color-coded schedule, looking for important names and those that could be pushed to make room for more essential tasks. On today’s schedule, he noticed a few that didn’t need to be there.

“Hina, can you move the Commerce Minister and Petroleum Ministers to tomorrow?” he said, taking the pen from her hand to circle the two names. “I want more time with the Speaker and the leader of the opposition to discuss new legislation.”

“Yes, Prime Minister,” she said, pulling another pen from her pad to make identical circles and a notation. “Would you like the Interior Minister in the noon meeting?”

The Prime Minister returned his attention to the schedule, looking for the noon meeting. There was a simple notation blocking off two hours on his schedule, personal time. Chaudhry had implemented this phrase to keep the records clean of meetings with influentials in case someone leaked the schedule, which happened on a daily basis in Azam Shah’s term. *It has yet to be repeated in mine even with all the curiosity from every corner of Islamabad.*

“Have him join towards the end.” Chaudhry replied. “There are some things that I want to consider privately before briefing him.”

“I’ll have him informed, sir,” she said, scribbling another notation on her copy.

The security detail opened the door to the Prime Minister’s office as he approached. His echoing footsteps deadened as he stepped onto the plush carpeting in the outer office. The outer office was a lavishly decorated, expansive room with the seal of the government woven into the carpet below. This was Amna’s, the receptionist and gatekeeper to the Prime Minister’s private office, domain. Amna was a hard taskmaster for the administrative team that operated under her command. Amna herself was there to receive visitors, direct them to the waiting area and make sure that their needs and questions were addressed before meeting the Prime Minister. For anyone entering, she was a stone wall that kept the day’s schedule on track, not allowing anyone to interrupt without Hina’s direct approval. They all rose as the Prime Minister passed through to the doorway framed with two flags, Pakistan and the Prime Minister’s office. His detail pushed open the doors to his private office.

Ahsan Chaudhry had spent many hours in this same office, both as an advisor to Azam Shah and as Interior Minister for the government, making his move more comfortable than for others who occupied his seat. That comfort hadn’t stopped him from pausing in

the doorway every morning for the past two months of his government to admire the surroundings. Unlike the outer office, the Prime Minister's private office was more ceremonial where guests and heads of state were entertained when privacy was required. He still felt uncomfortable looking at the wall of treasures that had been left behind from Azam Shah's state visits. He hoped to replace each item there with his own treasures, so that he could return these to the former Prime Minister's family at the right time. Towards the back of the room sat a large, hand-carved oak desk, behind it a credenza that showcased photographs of his family. As he moved around the desk, he looked at Hina to close the door, lifting the bowl of mangos from the center panel to reveal a hidden safe. He applied his thumb to the biometric reader and heard the safe click open. Inside the safe were all of the nation's secrets, available to only three people — the President, the Prime Minister and the Chief of Army Staff. He remembered signing the official secrets before his thumb was coded to open the safe as a requirement for anyone who sat in the Prime Minister's chair.

He pulled a couple of files from the safe related to the meetings of the day to familiarize himself with past actions and alliances. There was a knock at the door, and the PM slid a daily newspaper on top of the confidential files. The tea boy entered the office carrying a tray with coffee and biscuits.

"Good morning, Prime Minister sahib," Bacha said in his broken English. He was one of the casualties of Pakistan's public educational system, not educated enough to sound educated, but motivated enough to earn a middle class living. There were times over the past two weeks when Chaudhry spent time talking to him, mostly to understand his background and family. Chaudhry himself was an educational elitist, having studied at Aitchison and then Harvard.

Bacha placed the coffee and biscuits on the desk. The man started to walk away when the Prime Minister called his name, as he did many mornings at teatime.

"Bacha," Chaudhry said.

"Gee, *janab*," he said turning around to face him.

"I was told that it's your daughter's birthday today," Chaudhry said, remembering the note that Hina had placed on his schedule. Bacha didn't seem to register the Prime Minister's comment, so Hina translated into Urdu for him. He smiled when he understood. "How old is she today?" the Prime Minister asked, waiting again for Hina to translate.

Bacha's flattery at the Prime Minister's question quickly turned to embarrassment, recalling that he would need to give him a treat of some kind, as was tradition in Pakistan. He hesitated for a second, trying to frame the words correctly, "Prime Minister sahib, she is the... *paanch saal* today," he said, now even more embarrassed that he had forgotten five in English. "*Gharwalay bobot kbush hain*," he said with a smile.

Chaudhry smiled, laughing a bit at the foolishness of the boy, “*Gharwalay? Keya app kbush nahin hain?*” he asked. Bacha smiled and nodded before dropping his head, remembering that he was in the Prime Minister’s office. “Hina has a gift...*tohfa*...for your *beti*,” he continued. “Tell her *saalgira mubarak* from me.”

Bacha’s embarrassment disappeared and a smile covered his face from ear to ear. In the nearly two years of working for Azam Shah, he had not once remembered a birthday or wedding, but Chaudhry did. “Thank you Prime Minister gee. Thank you.”

Amna swept into the room behind Bacha during the conversation, handing a note to Hina before turning to exit, grabbing Bacha by the sleeve to guide him out with her. Chaudhry could hear her scolding Bacha behind the closed door, “*Mubarak bol diya. Aur kiya chahiye?*” He chuckled as Hina passed the note to him. Picking up his reading glasses, he quickly scanned the contents, looking at Hina, “Show them in.”

Hina got up from her chair next to the Prime Minister’s desk, adjusted her *kameez* and *dupatta* before moving to open the door. She stepped out, leaving it slightly ajar. He could hear her say, “He’ll see you now.”

The door immediately filled with the largesse of the speaker’s frame, almost obscuring the wiry leader of the opposition behind him. He stood there, waiting for the Prime Minister to look up from whatever he was reading, but as the minutes passed, his impatience got the better of him.

“Mr. Prime Minister, may we come in?” Tariq Nadeem, Speaker of the National Assembly, asked, each word liberally coated in venomous hatred for the man who occupied the chair he felt belonged to him.

Prime Minister Chaudhry’s head popped up from the memo he was reading, not realizing they were standing there. “Speaker sahib, you need no invitation!” he said, getting up and coming around the desk. “This is our office, not mine alone.” His hand was engulfed by the Speaker’s mammoth mitts. “Please take a seat. Hina, can you join us?”

Hina stepped in, closing the door behind her. She stopped for a moment to ask if anyone would like a beverage, before taking her seat at the small table behind the Premier’s chair. The Prime Minister returned to his desk to gather some notes, glancing at the memo he had been reading. He caught three words before closing it, “Suspect zero identified.” *I’ll have to ask about that during the noon meeting.*

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Faheem’s mind was playing tricks on him. He kept flashing back to the four-by-six cell in Nowshera where he had first met the men in black. They were nondescript, unidentifiable, and devilishly sadistic. *If I knew this was my fate, I would have struggled harder in Nowshera.*

The entire helicopter ride was a blur to him, memories of being hung over the side and feeling the ground disappear beneath him still flashing within his troubled psyche. The fear of falling hundreds of feet to his death danced in his head. He could still hear the men's laughter echoing in his head, followed by their commander's encouragement, "Again." And they did it again and again, as he was helpless to fight them, the whole time wondering if this was how he would die.

*Why won't they stop playing this incessant music?* The same four tracks repeated over and over since he had been thrown into the box, only stopping for prayer and interrogations, which were controlled by the jailers. Temperatures fluctuated to extremes, further throwing him into a confused state. Was it day or night? Was he in Pakistan or not? His mind was no longer his own, a slave to whatever thought or feeling the jailers wanted to torment him with. He had heard of secret prisons, black sites like this before and the tactics used in them, but the reality of the experience was too much for him to comprehend.

He recalled the first time an interrogator had entered the concrete box. Dressed in a black shirt and blue jeans, Smith, he called himself, was polite and friendly, bringing him a cup of hot tea along with a bowl of soup. He offered to help get his freedom if he would just cooperate with him, help them understand why he had done what he was accused of, but Faheem still had no idea what he was accused of, and no one would tell him. Smith's last words before going out the metal door were ominous, "You're just going to make this harder on yourself the more you resist. They take great pleasure from the ones who resist here." *I am not trying to resist, I just don't know what you want from me.* But that thought, like all of his others, had disappeared in the volume of the blaring music that filled his cage all day.

He had curled himself into a ball in the corner of the cage, trying to get respite from the cold, when four men rushed into the cell. It was a common occurrence during his stay to have men barge in and verbally abuse him. They only struck him occasionally and that when a jailer would momentarily lose control, letting his own anger explode. The other jailers would quickly pull the abuser back from Faheem, almost in a practiced act of preservation. He was almost grateful to his jailers in times like these. Confusion was warping his mind.

During the first days he was imprisoned, a jailer would stand over him as he offered his prayers, speaking on a telephone with his command. The jailer used words like uncooperative, break, torture, rendition and extreme frequently, interrupting his prayers and making him take significantly longer to complete them. This would anger the jailer, drawing accusations that he was abusing the kindness shown to him and for a period of time the prayer mat would not be provided, nor would he be told that it was time for prayer. He had once asked what time it was so that he could perform the correct prayer,

only to be told to pray Qaza, something that had stuck in his mind. *How do they know about Qaza? Are they Muslims?*

The jailers had done a masterful job in breaking the confident enforcer. In the concrete box he lived in now, he was no longer demanding answers. He was now a tool to be used however they wanted, a wealth of information that could be tapped to gain actionable intelligence on the activities that led up to the assassination of the Prime Minister and the Peshawar incident.

He heard the key enter the lock on the cell door. His mind raced, as there was a pause before the door was opened. *Would this be the jailers abusing me again or would another interrogator calmly sit down at the table to 'talk', as they put it?* Either way, he would only know once the door was opened. As the bottom of the door grated against the concrete floor Faheem backed slowly into a corner seeking protection from another potential onslaught, his body cringing with the memories of previous attacks. In the doorway stood a single shadow, outlined by the distant light in the corridor. He paused there, mocking Faheem's mind with the possibilities that could befall him in the coming minutes.

"Faheem, why don't you come out of the corner?" the familiar voice said. He saw the shadow turn his head and ask for some hot food to be brought in as he entered, leaving the door slightly ajar. *Was it left ajar for a reason or had he just not pulled hard enough to close it?* It was uncommon for an interrogator to be alone with him, at least it had not been the practice since he arrived there. Faheem slowly emerged from the corner unsure who the man was, but knew that he had heard the voice somewhere before. His eyes strained to find the shadow in the darkness of the box. The shadow also leveraged this confusion by staying out of the direct light in the center of the cage. Three men entered carrying portable table and chairs, a facility not afforded to Faheem in previous interrogations, where he had been forced to stand for hours on end. *What caused this change in procedure?* "Please sit down," the voice said from the shadows. "They are bringing you some food. I'm sure you could use some extra nourishment." Faheem strained his eyes, wanting to know who was showering him with this kindness, but the darkness hid the figure's true identity.

One of the more verbally abusive jailers entered the room with a tray of food in his hands. He walked across slowly, sliding the soles of his shoes against the floor. The noise made Faheem cringe, likening the noise to fingernails on a blackboard. He looked to the man in the shadows, who seemed unfazed by the noise, almost as if it wasn't really there. *Was it there?* The jailer placed the tray on the table, waiting a moment for Faheem to sit down. Faheem hesitated, angering the jailer. He came around the table and grabbed Faheem by the neck, forcing him to sit down. He growled in Faheem's ear, "Show respect to the person who has given you kindness, otherwise he may not do it again."

"Jones!" the voice called from the corner. "There is no need for that. Let our guest



learn to trust our kindness.” Jones glanced in the voice’s direction before exiting and responded with a simple, “Sorry sir. Won’t happen again.” Faheem’s eyes took in the amount and quality of food that had been provided by this new interrogator. Chicker *karahi*, fresh *naan*, yogurt, okra and rice were all placed on the tray. There were bottles of Pepsi and mineral water, unopened, to quench his thirst. He didn’t know whether to start eating or thank the interrogator first. The interrogator helped him along with his decision, “Please enjoy your meal. I’ll be back once you’re done.” He left as quietly as he had entered.

Faheem engorged himself on the food before him. He had not been given any real food since he arrived here, causing his stomach to become diarrheic from the constant diet of runny *daal* and undercooked rice. This was a proper meal, much like his wife made for him at home. His mind flashed back to the days of freedom, sitting behind his desk at the FC command with the tins that his wife prepared for him. He enjoyed her cooking, as did the other men under his command, regularly sharing with them in a communal mealtime. Those days were a fleeting memory, as were his wife and children. As he finished eating, he could not help but lick his fingers trying to capture every flavor, unsure when he would have this kind of meal again. The door opened again as he put the bottle of Pepsi down on the tray and Jones entered to collect it. Faheem grasped the bottle of mineral water, fighting with his remaining strength to keep it from Jones’s reach. Jones stood laughing at the display. Faheem looked like a child clutching a toy in the department store thinking that if he just held on long enough, he would be allowed to keep it. Jones reached out and snatched the bottle from him, smirking as he placed it back on the tray, now out of Faheem’s reach.

“Pick your battles,” he said, turning to leave. The interrogator walked in before Jones left the box and took the water bottle from the tray, handing it back to Faheem. Jones shrugged his indifference as he exited, leaving the door ajar again.

“They like to torment the detainees,” the voice said. “It’s like they’re cats playing with a mouse they’ve caught. If we let them, they would kill it.” He paused to let the words sink into Faheem’s torn psyche before continuing, “We control which mice get saved and which get eaten.” The words echoed in Faheem’s head. *This was all a game to them. In the end, they are going to kill me.* The man who had been a shadow and voice for the length of their interactions sat at the table and Faheem recognized him immediately. *This was the son of a bitch who had collected me from Nowshera. The one that had allowed the others to manhandle me and the same man that had encouraged them to hang me over the edge of the helicopter. He’s sadistic, why is he being so kind suddenly?*

The Major watched as Faheem pulled back from the table in recognition. He sat down. Pulling a cigarette pack from his pocket, he took one for himself and then offered a cigarette to Faheem. “Please sit down,” he said calmly. “I don’t understand why you’re so

scared of me. It's not like we dropped you from the helicopter," he said with a bland smile. This did nothing to calm Faheem's mind.

"We'd like your assistance in gathering some information," the Major said, speaking slower and at a measured pace. "The more cooperative you are, the more benefits you will get. The less you are...well...you know what happens when you don't cooperate," he said with a malevolent smirk. "Are you willing to assist us?"

Faheem's mind thought quickly of the demands that he wanted to make in return for his assistance. *The music? A bed?* The Major read the body language, knowing well what was going through the prisoner's mind. "Before you ask for anything, you need to give us something," he said. "Think of this like an auction. The more valuable the thing you give us, the more valuable the thing we give you in return." He watched Faheem's expressions closely, trying to see if the statement had registered in his tormented mind. It took a few minutes, but Faheem returned to the table and sat. "Am I to assume that means we understand each other?" the Major asked. Faheem nodded his head in agreement.

"Let's start with something simple to help you get comfortable," the Major said. "How long have you been using your posting in the Frontier Corps to pass information back to terrorists?" Horror washed over Faheem's face; he immediately understood that his world had collapsed around him. The answer to this one question would be a death sentence for him.

"I don't pass information to terrorists," Faheem said, voice trembling. "I am not a terrorist. I am a Commander in the Frontier Corps."

"See, there you've started with a lie," the Major said calmly. "You *were* a Commander. We made sure that the Brigadier issued your termination as soon as you were picked up by the army," he said, pulling the signed order from his leather portfolio. He paused to let Faheem read the charges and grounds for termination. The words jumped off the page insubordination, collaborating with the enemy, espionage. *Two of these are punishable under the military criminal code with death.* Faheem slid the paper back to the Major, shaking his head.

"You have no proof of any of these charges," Faheem stammered defiantly. "I will stand before a military tribunal and prove my innocence."

"You think that you were picked up because there's no proof?" the Major said, laughing. "If there was no proof, you wouldn't be here. We brought you here to give you a chance to admit to what you've done and help us capture those responsible." He stopped laughing suddenly, leaning across the table, closing the distance between himself and Faheem. "Don't fool yourself into believing that you will ever leave this place until you give us what we want," he said with a cold, unemotional tone that unhinged Faheem's mind.

"Let me ask you again...and this time, think about your answer carefully," the Major

said. "How long have you been passing information to terrorists?"

Faheem thought hard about the question, weighing the options before he answered. "I don't pass information to terrorists," Faheem repeated a second time.

The Major gathered his papers without hesitation and got up from the table. He stopped at the door, turning around to look at Faheem. "Don't say we didn't try to help you." As he turned back to the door, Jones met him. "Do we have him?" he asked Jones.

Jones shot a sadistic smile at Faheem before answering, "We picked him up from school this morning." *Who did they pick up from school? Who is this other one?* Faheem's face froze in horror when his twelve-year-old son, Amjad, was brought around the corner and into his sight. Faheem lurched from the table, trying to get to the door and save his son from the tormentor that had hold of him, but was restrained by the iron shackles the held him to the floor and table.

"Amjad!" he yelled. "Let him go. He has nothing to do with this!"

The Major turned around and looked at Faheem, "Nothing to do with what? Tell me now or forget him forever!" Faheem understood the tone in the Major's voice. He was the authority and would do what he wanted, if he didn't get the information that he wanted.

"Please don't hurt him. He's just a child," Faheem sobbed uncontrollably, tears running down his face as he thought of his son having to suffer this torment. "Please let him go..." Faheem begged.

"The solution is in your hands, Faheem," the Major said. "Answer the question. Decide who lives and who dies." Faheem continued to sob, bringing a familiar sadistic smile to Jones' face as he slammed the door between the two of them.

"Wait! Please wait!" Faheem screamed at the closed door, unsure if they could hear him or not. He could, however, hear Jones screaming at his son, followed by a hard bang against the door. "I did it!" he screamed at the door, rattling the irons that held his hands to the table. "I told them everything that the Army was planning! I..." The door swung open again, revealing blood on the floor outside it. Faheem's mind raced into overdrive. *Where was Amjad? What had they done to him?*

"Where is my son?" Faheem demanded of the interrogator. "What have you done to him?"

"Your son?" the man said with a grin. "You put your life before his and now you ask about his well-being?"

"Please just tell me where he is," Faheem pleaded. "I told you that I helped them..."

"That's not enough," the interrogator replied. "You were given a chance to cooperate by choice. You chose not to. Now, you will get information when we get what we want," he said, leaning against the edge of the table and pushing it into Faheem's chest. "What did you tell them?"

## CHAPTER 16

\*

The phone rang in the residence, echoing through the empty, dark hallways. The ringing stopped by the fifth bell, leaving him to assume that the caller had given up or one of the duty operators had answered. The Prime Minister rolled over in his bed, slipping his arm around Ayla, his wife of thirty years. He had just started to drift off to sleep again when there was a knock at the door. Ahsan Chaudhry had not enjoyed a full night's sleep for the past three weeks, dependent on quick naps when his schedule would allow. It had all started with the three words in a memo, suspect zero identified, and had increased with each security briefing. He gave his wife a gentle kiss on the cheek as he pulled away, laying flat on his side of the bed. The knock came again, this time slightly harder. The security detail knew they couldn't barge into his private quarters unless it was a matter of imminent national security. This didn't seem to meet that requirement, but Chaudhry knew that his sleep for the night was over.

The Premier rose from the bed and sat on the side, feet searching for his slippers on the cold floor below. Finding them, he stood and pulled on his robe. Ayla stirred in the bed, her hand searching for her husband. "Go back to sleep *jaani*," he said. "It's state business again." Her eyes opened for a moment, glancing at the shadow standing at the foot of the bed.

"What time is it?" Ayla asked, rolling over to check the clock on her bedside table.

"It's early," Chaudhry replied, looking at the Rolex on his left wrist. "Too early," he whispered, noting the time. Three a.m.? *This better be important.*

Chaudhry stumbled to the door, still half asleep, rubbing the sleep from the corner of his eyes. "This better be life and death," he said as he neared the closed door. Opening the door, he found a young man in uniform standing outside. He looked nervous. His eyes caught the figure still sleeping in bed behind the Premier, but he immediately diverted his attention back to the Premier standing in his robe, with a scowl on his face.

"What did you wake me for, soldier?" Chaudhry asked.

"Sir, the car will be here in fifteen minutes," the young soldier said. "I was told by my command to awaken you."

"Car for what?" Chaudhry asked, sleep rushing out of his mind. "Is there a problem? Has something happened?"

"Sir, I was only told to wake you and deliver the message."

The Premier looked at him thoughtfully, unsatisfied with the information provided. But he couldn't expect anything else from the doorman. "Let me know when the car arrives," Chaudhry said, closing the door. He stood for a moment, trying to understand why a car was coming to collect him at this hour, but nothing came to mind. With a long sigh, he

turned to walk to the bathroom to clean up before getting dressed, his mind wondering the whole time, why now? He turned the tap on the faucet, letting the water run to warm before splashing his face a few times. Looking up into the mirror, he checked the growth on his face considering whether he had enough time for a quick shave. *No, there isn't enough time*, he thought as he grabbed his toothbrush and toothpaste. His mind continued to run through the past few days of his schedule, trying to recall why he had been roused at three in the morning, but still nothing came to mind. As he brushed, staring into the mirror, it suddenly hit him. *Suspect zero. They must have captured him.*

Chaudhry's pace increased as he rinsed and wiped his face. The Army had been after suspect zero for weeks, following leads to nothing and nowhere. He was still at large, as far as the Premier knew. They must have him, why else would they send a car at this hour? He stopped as he was slipping his vest over the standard issue white cotton *kurta shalwar*. *Why send a car? They could have just told my driver to take me to them.* He sat down next to Ayla to wait for the car. The thought sat for a few seconds, but the excitement of finally seeing the face of the man who had assassinated Azam Shah was too great for him. *Would they let me speak to him? Maybe see him face-to-face.* The media would be shocked to find that we had caught him, he thought, picturing the faces of those bastard journalists who had been hounding him with questions about the investigation and lack of results. Lost in thought, he didn't hear the knuckles rapping against the wooden door, but Ayla did.

"Ahsan...Ahsan," she softly said. Getting no response, she sat up and reached across the bed for his arm, squeezing when she found it. "Ahsan, someone is knocking again."

Chaudhry's dream ended, interrupted by Ayla's statement. "I think they got him finally," Chaudhry said to his wife, without turning to look at her. "They got him, I think."

Ayla sat straight up in bed, "What did you say?"

Chaudhry rose from his side of the bed, turning to look at her. "I think the security services have arrested Azam's killer." The words came out, but Chaudhry didn't register what he had just said and Ayla was too surprised to comprehend. The Premier was almost halfway to the door before she spoke again.

"Why would they come now...for you?" Ayla asked. "You're not an interrogator."

"Honestly Ayla, I have no idea why they're coming to pick me up," Chaudhry replied. "There is something off about this."

The Prime Minister continued to the door, pausing a second before opening it. Gone was the young soldier who had come initially. Instead, Lt. General Misbah Qadir stood outside, dressed casually.

"Good morning, Prime Minister," the General said. "I hope you slept well. Are you ready to go?" The Premier flashed a smile at him, amused by the comment. He stepped out of his private quarters, closing the door behind him and followed the General down the hall. As they exited the residence, soldiers opened the doors of the vehicle to allow

both men to take their seats on either side of the vehicle.

“Was this really necessary? At this hour?” Chaudhry asked as the doors closed.

“Plausible deniability, sir,” Qadir answered. “We do this during the daylight hours, the media will be all over us. It will compromise you, this conversation and an ISI location that no one knows about,” he continued, pushing a button to close the partition between the driver and himself. He tapped on the partition to let the driver know they were ready to move. “We’ll be there soon, Mr. Prime Minister.”

Pulling out of the residence, the General handed a file to the Premier saying, “Give it a read, knowing the facts will assist us.” Chaudhry took the file, but was concerned that he didn’t see any lights of his protocol or escort vehicles with the car. This was disconcerting to the new Premier knowing that his predecessor had been assassinated, even with full security protocol.

“Where is my protocol?” Chaudhry asked.

“Mr. Prime Minister,” Qadir said. “There are times when you must be hidden in full view of everyone. No one can know you or I are in this vehicle.” Qadir pointed out the front windshield saying, “You notice no military protocol, no flags on the vehicle. Remember sir, plausible deniability.” Chaudhry nodded and returned his attention to the file before him. The more he read, the more shock set in. The more he understood, the angrier he got.

“How did we get all of this?” Chaudhry asked, pointing at the contents of the file. “How long have we had him?”

“This is a combination of intelligence gathered from suspect zero, investigations and our own on-ground assets,” the General calmly said. “We have had him for three weeks now.”

“Three weeks?!?” Chaudhry said, voice pitched with anger. “And you’re just telling me now?”

“Mr. Prime Minister, the intelligence services play close to the chest,” the General said. “Our people have to make on-the-spot decisions, sometimes at the risk of their own lives. We can’t afford to have people know what we are doing. There is no play-by-play in our world. If there were, there would be no point in being a clandestine service, would there?”

Chaudhry, still angry at not being read in sooner, understood that the intelligence services needed space to work. He had seen that during the Karachi operation, where no information was passed to the Interior Ministry while it was ongoing. Instead, the government was told when the operation was completed and the successes could be shared with everyone. Deep down, he knew if they had come to him sooner, there would have been pressure from every section of the government to announce, prosecute and punish the assassin before any actionable information could have been attained. Getting one would have done nothing to prevent a repeat down the road. They work in the shadows

for a reason, he said to himself.

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Staring out the window as the villages passed, el-Yahad had gotten quite bored of the continuous conversation from Nabeel, his guide from Islamabad to Bajaur. He had been on long excursions in Syria, traveling for hours on end, but there no one dared to talk this much to him. Nabeel seemed to have been told by his commanders to provide a full briefing on the road rather than waiting until they arrived at the camp.

“We have reached operational readiness in Bajaur and Jalalabad, sir,” Nabeel said. “We’ll demonstrate once we arrive at The Sanctuary.”

“When will that be?” el-Yahad asked, turning his head from the darkened window to look at him.

“We should arrive in about three hours,” Nabeel answered glancing at his watch.

*Three more hours? I’ll be dead by the time we get there.*

“Sir?” Nabeel asked. “Sir, is everything alright?”

“I need cigarettes and something to drink,” el-Yahad answered, turning back to the darkened window and the villages rushing by. “Can we stop somewhere?”

Nabeel looked around for a moment, getting his bearings on their location. He quickly gave the driver instructions. “We’re in Takht Bhai. We will stop for tea and *chapli kebab* in ten minutes.”

El-Yahad shrugged his assent, unconcerned with the location. *I’m just a prisoner on this trek*, he thought slipping his designer sunglasses back on. *How do these people do this regularly*, he wondered, and picked up a file, hoping to keep Nabeel’s mouth shut. Even if only for ten minutes.

As the black Land Cruiser pulled into the roadside restaurant, el-Yahad stepped out into the burning sunlight without hesitating to think about where he was. Some people stopped eating, turning to look at him, but most kept their attention off him, valuing their lives over momentary curiosity. Their curiosity further dissipated when the two escort vehicles of armed gunmen emptied behind him. Nabeel led the way up the stairs to the VIP seating area, continuously looking around as if he expected someone to be watching.

This made el-Yahad very nervous, having been in a similar situation while visiting mid-level Hezbollah commanders in Southern Beirut. His instincts told him to leave, not willing to take the risk. The environment had been similar to this one — single-story buildings, heavy foot traffic and many people with military grade weaponry. While his vehicle sat at the traffic light a block away, the whole restaurant had been demolished by a surgical Israeli air strike. He had learned to trust his instincts more since that day. Here, he wasn’t sure. Takht *Bhai* sat at the edge of Pakistan’s wild west, the lawless tribal areas

where affiliation was the difference between life and death.

Nabeel must have sensed el-Yahad's reservation from the landing above, suddenly stopping his ascent and rushing down to his side. "Sir, if you don't want to stay," he said concerned, "we can leave. We have a 'friend' down the road where you might feel more secure." El-Yahad nodded and immediately headed back to the vehicle. Nabeel barked out orders to the drivers and security and they rushed back to the cars. As el-Yahad climbed into the Land Cruiser, he noticed Nabeel talking intensively to one of the security men *What's going on?* The man ran back to his vehicle and they rushed off before Nabeel climbed in with el-Yahad.

El-Yahad waited for Nabeel to explain the conversation with security, but Nabeel remained silent. "What was that about?" he asked impatiently, motioning to the scene that had just played out in front of the vehicle.

"I sent him ahead to let our friend know that we are coming with a guest," Nabeel said. "We will rest there for a few hours and then continue to Bajaur."

El-Yahad was somewhat satisfied with the explanation, calming his concerns as the vehicle pulled out of the restaurant only to stop again a hundred yards down the road Nabeel turned, looking down at the cigarette pack, memorizing it and asking, "Coke or Pepsi?"

He was impressed that Nabeel remembered the reason for the stop, realizing he may not be as useless as he seemed. "Get whatever is cold," he said pulling a thousand rupee note from this pocket for Nabeel.

"Please sir," Nabeel said as he exited the car, shaking his head. "You are our guest. There is no need for your money." He closed the door behind him. It had been a while since el-Yahad had been in the area and he had forgotten the Pukthoonwala code of hospitality that was famous here. Nabeel wasn't gone long, returning with a carton of his cigarette brand and cold drinks. Climbing into the vehicle, Nabeel gave instructions to the driver before handing the cold drink and carton to el-Yahad. "From the freezer, sir," he commented. "It doesn't get colder around here than this."

Nabeel was silent for the forty-five minute drive to Dargai. It was a welcome respite from the constant jabbering, el-Yahad thought to himself. More than anything else, it gave him time to think about everything that Nabeel has shared with him thus far. Operational readiness was a difficult achievement for a non-military force, especially one made up of individuals driven by a 'higher purpose'. As his mind considered what mayhem and destruction could be caused in both Pakistan and Afghanistan, he remembered the assassination of the Prime Minister.

"Nabeel," el-Yahad started. "You said that the camp had achieved operational readiness." Nabeel nodded, affirming the conversation from hours earlier. "You know... when the military says that, we have done some missions to confirm. Has the camp done



any?”

Nabeel smiled like a proud new father. He savored the moments, as they played in his memory. Then it all disappeared, washed from his face. He realized that the Sheikh would be angered if he knew that Nabeel had told the General. “Sir, the Sheikh will explain that to you,” Nabeel said, almost sad that he would not be able to share the details.

“Nabeel,” the General said, taking the role of a consoling father. “My brother, you should be honored to have achieved all that you have. Allah will bless and reward all those involved.” He had led men in battle prior to joining the intelligence services, commanded field operatives since. He knew the thing that made them stronger and better warriors was encouragement. It pushed back doubt, reservations and the painful memories of lost brothers. He held a different position than the Sheikh, who was nothing more than a battlefield commander. He was the General. His words carried more power in a young warrior’s mind, whether he was part of the mission or not. The soldier just needed to know he had done well.

As the vehicle pulled to a stop outside the majestic wooden gate, the driver blew the horn three times in rapid succession. The gate was pulled open by two men from the security detail that had raced ahead of them in *Takht Bhai* within seconds. The driver revved the engine and pulled inside, driving between two buildings into a beautifully shaded courtyard where they parked. The escort vehicle pulled to a stop just inside the gate from where the guards raced to the General’s vehicle. Nabeel stopped him before he could open the door.

“Sir, how do we introduce you?” Nabeel asked cautiously. “Do we tell him who you are?” The General paused for a moment, considering the question. *You couldn’t ask this during the drive, but could bore me with minute details about camp operations?* He didn’t know this man and couldn’t risk being compromised, even by someone Nabeel called a ‘friend.’

“I am Sheikh Abdul Hanif al-Badr, Saudi national,” the General said without thinking, giving Nabeel a fully backstopped identity used during his field operative days. The identity had not been burned by Syrian intelligence and would withstand the most rigorous checking. Nabeel nodded and pulled back his hand.

Nabeel was out of the vehicle first, quickly climbing the three stairs to the veranda of the *hujra*. He gave the man a hearty embrace, as the General came around the vehicle’s rear. Nabeel was exchanging formalities when the General arrived at his side. Nabeel stepped back from the man, allowing the General his first opportunity to assess his host.

“Maulana Sami Ullah,” Nabeel said. “It is my great honor to introduce you to another close friend of the brotherhood, Sheikh Abdul Hanif al-Badr.”

“*As-Salaam-a-laikum* Sheikh Hanif,” the Maulana said, kissing him on the cheek. “*Keyfa balak?* My apologies, that is the extent of my conversational Arabic.”

“*Wa-laikum-as-salam*, Maulana sahib. *Ana bakhair.*” the General replied laughing. He had

always hated these pretenders to Islam. Becoming a hafiz at a young age and because some unknown seminary in Pakistan had 'educated' them, these fools called themselves maulanas, mullahs and imams. Their entire knowledge of Islam came from the mouths of those who also couldn't understand Arabic beyond what was written in the Holy Quran. *They make good cannon fodder for our wars, too stupid to know what jihad really means.* "You are better than me. I have no conversational Pashto," he continued, causing the men to join him in laughter.

"Please join us inside," the Maulana said gesturing to the open door to the *hujra*. As they entered, the General was amazed at the number of dishes that had been prepared for them. His gaze moved around the room seeing a collection of books on a small bookshelf a Kalashnikov propped up against it. There were numerous *ayats* stitched into fine fabrics adorning the walls, along with the black Saudi flag hanging next to another that he didn't recognize. Probably another political party in Pakistan, el-Yahad thought to himself.

"Maulana sahib," he said. "You have gone to too much trouble." Knowing the traditions of the area, he knew that he would be forced to sample each dish before being allowed to leave the makeshift meal area. "This is just too much."

"Nonsense, Sheikh sahib," the Maulana said smiling. "Even this is too little for a guest of our friends in Bajaur. They told me that you had not eaten since leaving Islamabad, so we prepared for a hungry man. Please be seated."

The Maulana called for his servants to bring cold drinks for the guests, finally taking a seat next to Nabeel on the floor. As the boys, who looked like students from the madrassah, brought in the items, the Maulana shared his background as well as he could in the broken English that he spoke. He explained that he was a member of the National Assembly from one of the faction groups of the Jamaat-e-Islami party, one of Pakistan's staunchest religious groups. He had strong ties to the community and recruited many boys for the Afghan resistance. He was in his 60s, if not older, and wore the familiar long beard and shortened *shalwar* that categorized the mullahs of Pakistan. Compared to el-Yahad, he was a diminutive 5'8" against his 6'1" frame.

"What brings you to our Pakistan, Sheikh sahib?" the Maulana asked, with his mouth full of chicken *korma*.

Most of the conversation was filled with small talk and general topics. The Maulana tried to breach the topic of what brought el-Yahad to Pakistan and specifically Bajaur, but el-Yahad stayed in character, holding his tongue in the presence of others. Once they got up from the meal, the General excused himself to have a cigarette outside. The Maulana followed him out shortly after.

"It is good to have brothers like you in the cause, Maulana," the General said, fighting the urge to sneer at the accolades and adjectives the Maulana has used to describe himself. "I have come for two things. First, my brothers in the Kingdom wish to know how their

donations have been used. Second, I wanted to see how the camp is functioning.” He paused to see if there was a reaction from the Maulana. When he got none, he continued “It is one thing to see photos and a complete other thing to see with my own eyes.”

“You will be impressed with what you see,” the Maulana said. “I have not seen anything like it since my days in the jihad against the Russians.”

The General paused for a moment, taking a deep drag from his cigarette. “You were part of the jihad?” he asked, quickly doing the math on his age. *He must have been in his late forties then.*

The Maulana grinned at the question, knowing that the General didn’t believe what he had just said. “Please follow me,” he said moving to a closed door a few meters down from where they had finished eating. Pulling a set of keys from a pocket under his *kameez*, he slipped it into the doorknob. El-Yahad heard the lock click and the Maulana pushed the door open. “This is my private study,” he said switching on the lights, stepping aside to allow the General to enter. The Maulana closed the door behind him.

The room was an amazing homage, a historical record of the Maulana’s activities during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Photographs covered the walls, some black and white, others in color, each chronicling who he had met, spent time with and the depth of his involvement. On another wall were neatly organized, framed photographs of young boys, each with a gold nameplate below them. They were engraved with the names and date of martyrdom in memory of those who had gone from his madrassah. He had never seen a wall of honor like this. As he stood taking in the names and faces, the Maulana stepped alongside him, saying, “They were like sons to me. I will never forget what they did for Islam.”

“It is beautiful,” the General replied. “*Al-hum-do-lillah*, you shall be rewarded for their sacrifices. You have sent warriors in Allah’s name.”

He moved away from the wall, looking at the many photographs along the others. It was a who’s who of the Taliban and its supporters. El-Yahad recognized many faces not only from the conflict, but also his own personal interactions. Mullah Omar, Khalid Haqqani, Osama bin Laden, and the good doctor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, all in the photographs with a younger version of the Maulana. He was also in photographs with Americans, Brits and many Pakistani military officials. *The Maulana was well connected*, he thought to himself, *it’s a good thing that my identity is backstopped otherwise I could have problems with the man.* El-Yahad stopped at one photograph, taking a longer look than he had the others. *I know these people.*

“Maulana sahib,” the General called. “Who are these Americans?”

The Maulana walked over to him, pulling his bifocals from his chest pocket. “Ah, our friends from the CIA,” he said, pointing to the individuals. He pulled off his bifocals, taking a moment to clean them on his shirt before putting them back on. “This is Chris...

Andrews, I think his name was. He taught our boys explosives. This is David Northwright, the weapons trainer. And this last gentleman is Tom Davidson, a great man. He taught close quarter combat,” he explained pointing at each man as he spoke. “I have lost touch with David since he was stationed in Columbia. Andrews was killed in Nuristan by a mortar shell. No one knows what happened to Davidson. He just disappeared one day.”

El-Yahad looked hard at the photo of Davidson, recognizing facial features. Davidson hadn’t disappeared. No one knew his new identity.

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The car whipped around the corner, flashing its lights at two men standing outside a gate before turning them off. The men rushed in through the walk-through and pulled the gate open from both sides. The car passed through and the men slammed the gate shut just as quickly as they had opened it, returning to their positions outside. The facility, a disused warehouse, was located in Islamabad’s industrial estate. The six-acre warehouse was purchased nearly a decade ago through a shell company and converted into one of the intelligence service’s largest off-book detention and interrogation centers. This was where high-value targets were brought and housed until they could no longer provide usable intelligence. The lucky ones were either released or turned over to the courts for prosecution. The center was highly secure and its location was need-to-know only. Most visitors that came to the facility were transported in official vehicles that went to great lengths to avoid direct routes in case someone might be following or the passenger might be trying to track their path.

As the vehicle entered the compound, another gate was opened to the interior of the facility where the car was ushered in. There were already three other vehicles parked there, including an emergency vehicle for medical services. The Premier stepped out of the vehicle and noticed that there was no military markings anywhere in his eye line, even the men were dressed in nondescript black clothing rather than their standard issue military fatigues. As they walked in, he took note that not one of the men they passed in the parking area or the corridors stopped to salute the General or showed any recognition of who he was. Where were they?

“General,” Chaudhry said. “Where are...”

The General stopped dead in his tracks and turned on a dime, right into the face of the oncoming Prime Minister, causing him to jerk backwards to avoid impact. “It’s not General here,” he said in a muted voice. “This is a black site for high value targets. No one has a military rank within these walls. They can’t know who each individual is for security reasons,” he said, pointing to an area beyond the Premier’s vision.

“Who can’t know?” Chaudhry asked, confused by the General’s coded statement. “And

what am I supposed to call you?”

“Ahsan,” he said. “You can call me Misbah.” He turned around again and resumed his stride down the corridor until he reached a door approximately two hundred yards into the facility. The General opened the door, waiting for the Premier to join him and step inside, entering quickly behind him and closing the door.

The room was a large, air-conditioned area with television screens of various sizes covering the walls. A team of four operators controlled each of the screens that intermittently changed the video feeds to monitor all the activities within the facility. The Premier took in the various pictures of the exterior of the facility, interrogation rooms, the holding cells and the corridors as they flashed across the screens, wondering why there was no sound coming from anywhere. The Prime Minister moved from screen to screen looking for volume controls to be able to hear what was going on in each of the videos that he was seeing, but could find none. He found his way to one of the operators and leaned over the console asking, “Why are things so quiet?” The operator looked up at him, wondering who he was and why he was bothering him, then looked over to the General for instruction on what to do with the question that he was asked. The General gave an imperceptible nod and the operator returned to monitoring the screens without answering the Premier’s question. The Premier turned to the General even more confused. He jerked around when the quiet of the room erupted with screams of pain coming from one of the screens. He pushed his hands to his ears to try to block out the bloodcurdling screams, only to have it change as the operator turned the dial to another video feed that was blasting American music into a holding cell. As the operator continued rotating the knob, the sounds in the room continued to change giving the Premier an understanding of why the room was kept so quiet. The General called to the operator, “I think that’s enough.”

“What the hell is going on here?” Chaudhry asked, looking to the General for answers.

“Ahsan, this is the one and only time that you will be here,” he said. “Our... guests... are subjected to hours of loud, annoying music, wild variations of temperature and behavior modification controlled by trained personnel and interrogators with one single goal — break the detainee mentally and physically. That is how we got that file of information that you read on the way here.”

“Isn’t this illegal? Against some Geneva convention or other?” Chaudhry asked. “We can’t do this.”

“We don’t do this,” the General replied with steel in his voice. “The military does this to protect the nation of internal and external threats. We can’t be concerned about conventions that apply to nations when dealing with those who have none.”

“But Ge...Misbah,” the Prime Minister said. “These are our citizens.”

“Our citizens?!?” the General said laughing. “These people are not citizens of my country. They know a singular purpose...to create mayhem and destruction in Pakistan.

And we will do whatever needs to be done to stop them,” he continued. “Now, please sit down so I can show you why we brought you here.”

The Premier wanted to argue his position with the General, but the look in his eyes said that would be the worst thing to do at this point. The General turned to one of operators saying, “Bring suspect zero to the interrogation rooms.” The operator picked up the wireless set that sat on the table next to him, giving orders to someone in the holding area. The Prime Minister watched the screens, looking for any sign of who suspect zero was. “Put it up on the main screen for our guest to watch,” the General said. The operator quickly flipped the dial and transferred the video feed to the main screen in front of the two men, turning to find the right button for the microphone in the room.

As they watched the detainee being dragged out of one of the cells, the door to the room buzzed open and a young bearded man entered. The General rose to greet him and had a quick conversation before bringing him over to meet the Premier.

“Ahsan Chaudhry,” the General said. “This is Afzal Saleem, one of our interrogators and deep cover assets. Afzal, you know Ahsan.”

“Only from certain tape recordings,” Afzal said smiling. The General was amused by the subordinate’s thinly veiled joke, knowing that there was more truth to the statement than either would like to let on to the Premier. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir.”

The Prime Minister shook his hand as Afzal took a seat behind the two men. Afzal was there to confirm or refute any information that was gleaned from suspect zero, a.k.a. Faheem. Afzal Saleem was a cover identity for any ISI asset in a room with a civilian. Asset identities were never compromised. In this case, Afzal Saleem was Kamal Khan.

Faheem was led into the interrogation room by two men and chained to the hook in the concrete floor. His hands were left shackled but not chained to the floor. He tried to resist, but one of the men slammed a forearm into his jaw, forcing him into compliance. He had been regularly beaten over the past three weeks causing swelling around the eyes, jaw and nose. His face was unrecognizable compared to the photograph in his file. As the operator adjusted the focus and sound levels of the microphone, another man dressed in black entered the room, sitting down on a chair near Faheem. The Premier assumed that was the interrogator, but wondered why Afzal was there if that was the interrogator.

“Good morning, Faheem,” the man said. “Did you sleep?”

Faheem looked over at the man, shaking from fear of being abused again and the untended wounds on his body. “I...can’t...sleep,” he responded. “Too...much...pain.”

“Pain?” the interrogator asked. “You know that you’re the one that controls the amount of pain you feel or don’t feel?”

Faheem’s body shook as he struggled against the chains. “I...have...told you...everything...”

“Now, we both know that isn’t true,” the man said, rising from his chair and moving

around behind Faheem. "There are so many things that you aren't telling me."

"No...I have...told you...everything," Faheem sputtered.

The man came around him and hit him with a hard right cross, causing his head to jerk to the left, spitting blood and drool out on the floor. "You have not told me everything Faheem," the man said, drawing close to his face. "If you had told me what I want to know, I wouldn't need to continue interrogating you. Would I?"

"What else...can...do...you want...to know" Faheem said, blood drooling out of his mouth. "I...don't know...anything else..."

The man stopped to the left of him, pausing to consider whether to hit him again. He went back to his chair and picked up the file, sitting down. "Faheem, tell me about The Sanctuary. How many rooms does it have?"

"What sanctuary?" Faheem replied, fighting the pain that was shooting through his jaw, already dislocated once, that now seemed to be fractured. "I...have never...been to...a sanctuary."

"Faheem, we have an asset on ground in Bajaur that told us that you are a frequent visitor to The Sanctuary," the man said, reading the notes that had been provided from Kamal's intelligence. "Let's start with something easier. Who lives at The Sanctuary?"

"I don't know!" Faheem yelled at the interrogator. "I don't know about this place at all."

Back in the room, Afzal leaned forward and asked the General, "How long do we wait before I go in and start properly interrogating him?"

"If you think you can get better results," the General said looking back at him with a smile, "please go ahead. We have not been able to get more from him."

Afzal didn't need a second invitation, getting out of his chair and going into a room. He emerged minutes later in the standard black attire of the facility staff and exited the room.

"Where is he going?" Chaudhry asked the General. "Is he an interrogator?"

"He is a...specialist," the General replied. "He has been on-ground in the area that suspect zero is being questioned about and inside The Sanctuary."

"Why wasn't he used before?" Chaudhry asked.

"Because he thinks that Afzal is dead..." the General replied with a slight smile. "This should be interesting."

There was a knock at the door that stopped the interrogation questions. The interrogator looked at the door for a moment before resuming his questioning. The first knock was followed by a much harder knock, turning to a pounding, causing the interrogator to stop his questioning again.

"What is it!" he yelled opening the door, but his attitude quickly changed when he saw who was standing on the other side. Faheem couldn't see anything, his vision hampered by

both the swelling of his eyes and the wall.

“Good morning sir,” Faheem heard the interrogator say, only able to make out this side of the conversation.

“No, sir. He has not.”

“But sir, just a little more time and I can get the information we need.” Faheem quietly smirked to himself, listening to the dressing down that the interrogator was getting for not getting whatever information the man outside wanted. “Yes, sir.”

Faheem watched as the interrogator returned to the room, looking extremely dejected by what had just happened outside. Collecting his pad and files, he looked at Faheem and shook his head. “You had a chance with me,” he said, as two men entered pushing metal carts with various instruments on them. “Now, you don’t have a chance. The next interrogator...he has a reputation for...” He walked slowly to the door, turning around once again. “If you want to get out of here alive, just tell him what he wants to know,” he said, his voice laced with concern for Faheem for the first time. “Just tell him, otherwise...” He walked around the corner, footsteps fading away into the distance

Faheem sat alone in the room, feeling slightly confident that he had caused whoever was holding him to change interrogators because they were unable to extract the required information. He had held his will through the abuse and torture, not revealing anything about The Sanctuary, the Sheikh or Mullah Fazal. His fear of what they could do to him far outweighed anything the interrogator could do. But as he looked at the instruments on the carts, his mind began to visualize how each could be used and a new fear filled him. *They are not interested in just information anymore, they are going to punish me until I talk.* He began to shake as the fear spread through his brain, occupying all his thoughts.

A man came around the corner and stood in the doorway. The light was behind him, causing Faheem to strain his eyes to make out his features. Rather than rushing in, the man called orders to the guards who were already inside the room. “Inject him,” he said calmly. One man reached for a syringe on the cart, another grabbed hold of him so that he could not move. Faheem fought, writhing from one side to side to avoid the injection, but was unable as the man finally penetrated his skin with the needle. He felt his body begin to seize up, unable to move his torso or legs. *What is this drug*, he thought as it slowly moved through his body stopping movement completely. He yelled as the paralytic took over his body, but there was something else in that syringe, something that made the visions in his mind come to life as if they were real.

“I didn’t think that I would see you again after Peshawar,” the man said from the shadows in the back of the room, out of Faheem’s sight. “But here we are.” Faheem recognized the voice from the warehouse, but how...

“Show yourself!” Faheem yelled, trying to turn his head but the paralytic had frozen his muscles. “I killed you! I shot you myself, how can you be here?” Faheem shouted, his voice



echoing in the room.

“Well, that clarifies that you’re as bad a shot,” the man laughed menacingly, “...as you are a liar.” He said came out of the shadows to reveal himself. He walked slowly towards him, speaking in careful measured bursts, making sure to register each word in Faheem’s mind. “I am not as kind as the last man who questioned you. I’m going to ask questions and you’re going to answer them. If you lie to me or try to hide something from me...” Kamal swung his elbow around and landed it hard against Faheem’s windpipe. Faheem gasped trying to catch his breath as the pain of the impact shot through his neck. “Do we understand each other?” Faheem tried to reach out to grab him but his arms wouldn’t respond to his demands. Kamal landed another punch to his face, further closing his already swollen eye. “Do...we...understand...each other?” Kamal asked again, hovering over Faheem.

“I have...told...them everything,” Faheem stammered out.

Kamal laughed again. “You have told them what they know. I have been to The Sanctuary, you can’t lie to me.”

Faheem now understood why the interrogator showed so much concern for him before leaving the room. He was blind to the details that Faheem shared, taking everything to be verified by this man. Obviously, they had figured out that most of what he had told them was lies. Dawood was someone who intimately knew The Sanctuary and would be able to decipher his lies as he told them.

“Let’s get started,” Kamal said. “I don’t want to waste my time with you. I have other more pressing things to do today.” He paused for a second, watching Faheem trying to struggle with the shackles that bound him. “How many people are stationed at The Sanctuary as security?” he asked calmly.

“I don’t know,” Faheem yelled back at him.

Kamal was angered by the answer. He leaned in close to Faheem’s face, saying “Do you think that I’m as stupid as you are? You tried to capture me, but couldn’t. We got you,” he whispered. “I don’t want you to think that you’re anything more than a prisoner...we...no, I will do what I want with you. No one is going to save you from me,” he said, picking up a rod from the cart. “Now, let’s try this again. How many people are stationed at The Sanctuary as security?” he asked again, pushing a lever on the rod causing electricity to jump from it.

“Twenty five,” Faheem said watching as he brought the rod closer to him, electric charges jumping as he neared.

“Much better,” Kamal said. “Coverage? How many men where?”

“Ten men in the house, another fifteen along the mountainside.”

“See, when you cooperate, no one touches you,” Kamal said with a devious smile. “How many snipers and anti-aircraft weapons?” he asked, walking towards the wall in

front of Faheem.

“None,” Faheem said without hesitation. Kamal spun around, surprised that Faheem had chosen to lie again.

“I thought we understood each other...” Kamal said as he stepped forward, touching the electric rod to the iron shackles on Faheem’s wrists. He watched as he convulsed from the electric shock charging through his body, the room filling with the smell of burnt flesh. Kamal barely stepped out of the way as Faheem vomited all over himself.

“Guard!” Kamal called out. “Come wash him off.” The guard entered through the slightly open door with a power hose in his hands, releasing a high-pressure stream of water at Faheem’s body. The impact spun the chair around and knocked it to the ground; the leg restraints kept it from turning completely around. “Turn it off and pick him up,” Kamal said. The guard dropped the hose and snatched him off the ground, sitting him straight again. “Now, let’s try that again...how many snipers and anti-aircraft weapons?” Kamal asked again, beating his hand with the rod. Faheem watched as Kamal picked up a piece of rubber from the cart and drop it on the concrete floor beneath him. Stepping onto the rubber mat, Kamal ignited the electric rod again. He turned to Faheem, asking again, “Snipers? Anti-aircraft weapons?”

Faheem paused, watching the electricity jump from the rod, recalling the shocks that had rushed through his body minutes before. His delay bothered Kamal, feeling that he needed some incentive to answer faster. Faheem quickly spoke before the rod could be touched to his body again, “Four,” he yelled. “Four snipers and two anti-aircraft guns.”

Kamal smiled again, knowing that he had found the leverage point. “Guard! Bring in the board.” The guard moved a large pinboard into the room with an aerial shot of The Sanctuary, placing it in front of Faheem. Kamal ‘accidentally’ dropped the electric rod into Faheem’s lap, sending shock waves coursing through his body. He left it there for a moment, watching him jerk and shake from the electricity running through his body, before he casually walked to the cart and cut the electric supply. “That was for Kaleem, you son of a bitch,” he snarled when he returned, kicking it from his lap. “Done with that toy,” he said menacingly, turning to see what else had been brought into the room on the carts.

Kamal stood over Faheem, whose body continued to convulse from the aftershocks. “Where is Mullah Fazal?”

Faheem fought to regain control of his body, shaking and vomiting intermittently. He looked at Kamal, wondering what he would do if he didn’t answer, believing that the electric shock was just a small taste of his sadistic side. Kamal sneered at him, reading his thoughts. Knowing that the drug he had injected him with was making the words more vivid in Faheem’s mind, he decided to use a different approach.

“Did you ever think about how I got past all your guards at the warehouse?” Kamal

asked with a hint of arrogance in his voice. "I mean other than the far superior training of the Army compared to the Frontier Constabulary, do you think about it? One man against six armed men? They are all dead, and here I am. How do you think that happened?" He reached over, putting his hand on the cart, "I didn't need any of these things that night...and I don't need them now to get you to talk to me," Kamal said, pushing the cart away. "I just need these," he said, holding his hands up in Faheem's face. Waving them in front of Faheem, he pulled his hand back and landed a hard slap across his face, sending his head jerking in the other direction. "Mullah Fazal...where is he?"

"Top floor of the house," Faheem called out, in between spitting out the blood that was now flowing freely from his mouth.

"How many guards around him?"

"Five, at all times," Faheem said, cowering in the chair in fear of a reprisal.

"Is he always at the house?"

"Yes."

Kamal stopped for a moment to think about the next question. He had instilled the fear into Faheem that the other interrogator had not been able to achieve. But there was some particular information that he wanted from this detainee.

"Who ordered the assassination of the Prime Minister?" he said to Faheem, calmly.

Faheem knew nothing about the orders. He was not taken into operational confidence by the command of The Sanctuary or the Sheikh. These were things that were decided by people that he had never met, but if he told Kamal that, the abuse would be biblical.

"I don't know," Faheem said, spitting blood from his mouth again. "The Sheikh didn't ever tell me who ordered it."

Kamal paused, looking up at the camera that was watching the interrogation. The second name that no one had been able to extract in three weeks of interrogation, he had gotten within an hour of entering the room.

"There is no Sheikh in the file," the Premier said to the General, watching on the monitor.

"There is no Sheikh in your file, Ahsan. We have known about him for months now," the General said, smiling at the success. "Now, you will find out what we know."

"Who is the Sheikh?" Kamal asked Faheem.

"You have met him," Faheem said. "He is the one that told me to kill you and Kaleem because you were traitors to the cause."

"We're traitors?" Kamal asked. "Because we won't attack our own country?"

"Traitors because you won't fight for Islam," Faheem said. "The Sheikh said that you deserved the death of a *kafir*."

Kamal restrained himself from striking Faheem again for that comment. "Who is the Sheikh?"

“Sheikh Atif,” Faheem said. “He is an American that finances and supports all the jihadi activities in the camp.”

“An American?” Kamal said. “And you call me a *kafir* when you take orders from him?”

“He is loyal to the cause, unlike you.”

“Where is the Sheikh?” Kamal asked, fighting every instinct in his body that wanted to cut Faheem’s throat. “Where can we find him?”

“You won’t find him,” Faheem said. “He is protected by his friends.”

“Why don’t you let me worry about that? Tell me where he is!” Kamal growled at him.

“He is at The Sanctuary during training exercises, otherwise he stays in Jalalabad.”

“Who are his friends that protect him?” Kamal asked, searching the cart for another instrument.

“You know his friends. They are like you.”

“Like me?” Kamal asked, looking over at him.

“Yes, spooks.”

Kamal smiled, knowing he had gotten what he needed from Faheem. He picked up another syringe and squeezed the air out of the tube. “This will help relax you,” Kamal said. “It won’t hurt you at all, but you might feel some pain afterwards,” he said, injecting the syringe into Faheem’s blood stream.

He started to walk out of the room, but Faheem called to him from behind. “You know why you hate me so much! Do you know why?” Faheem said. “I took everything that I was trained to hate and fight, and used it against those who trained me. I am what the ISI hates the most.”

Kamal stopped at the door and looked over his shoulder. “And you have met the same fate as others like you,” he said as he walked out the door.

The Premier and the General watched as Faheem’s body convulsed from the injection, his mouth foaming with spit and bile. For two minutes, he shook and strained trying to fight whatever he had been injected with, but lost the battle as his body went limp.

“Kill the feed,” the General said to the operator at the controls. The screen changed to static, as the Premier struggled with his own confusion over what had just happened.

“What happened? Is the interrogation done?” he asked, looking to the General for direction. “Can he be produced before the courts?”

“He has had an unfortunate accident,” the General replied, cold and emotionless. “He won’t be produced anywhere.”

“But he needs to be prosecuted for his crime,” the Premier said, getting up from his chair.

The General turned to answer him as the door to the room opened again, “He has just been sentenced for his crime, Ahsan.”

The Premier was shocked that he had just watched the intelligence services torture and kill a detainee. “But you can’t do this!” he yelled at the two men.

“Did you, at anytime during the interrogation, order me to stop it?” the General asked. “Did you?”

“No, but...”

“There are no buts in our business. You have just committed a war crime, so it would be best that you never speak of this again,” the General smiled coldly, turning to shake Kamal’s hand for the intelligence extracted.

The Premier stood, beside himself with shock. *Why hadn’t he said anything? Why did he allow it to continue?* These were questions that he would struggle with over the next days and weeks, as he knew what little sleep he was getting each night was now a fast fading memory.

## CHAPTER 17

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Anyone looking at the campus would find nothing inconsistent with a normal day. The exercise yards were full of candidates playing cricket, football and other activities to increase their physical strength and endurance. The classrooms and library were in session and full to capacity as the finer points of combat were being imparted to another class of commandos for the Pakistan Army. Nothing looked different to anyone who might be passing by. No one knew of the collection of commandos inside the facility's lecture hall other than the commandant of the facility.

The assembly had not been a matter of happenstance but initiated weeks ago. Days after completing Faheem's interrogation, a secretive high-level meeting was commissioned at ISI headquarters to determine the next course of action against the jihadi camp that had planned and executed the assassination of Azam Shah. There were only three men in the meeting that day, the Director General of the ISI, Brigadier Haroon Ahmed and Captain Kamal Khan. The Brigadier, a commando himself, had gained his experience in Siachen, on the Line of Control and in skirmishes with foreign fighters in the tribal areas. His military record demonstrated that he didn't appreciate words like capture and prisoner in his battlefield commands, preferring to execute the combatant on the field. He was a favorite of the men that he commanded for this reason.

"Gentlemen, when can I expect this to be a go?" Lt. General Misbah Qadir asked the two men, who glanced at each other before the Brigadier spoke.

"Four weeks sir," Haroon replied. "Two weeks for planning, two weeks for preparation. Then we are ready within ninety minutes of a go order."

"Good," the General said nodding his head. "I do have a few requests that you must include in your assault calculations. Haroon, I know you will be against this, but indulge my requests."

"Sir, this is your op," Haroon replied. "I am only there to execute and oversee."

The General had always had a great deal of respect for his colleague. They had both been at Pakistan Military Academy Kakul and Quetta Staff College around the same time Haroon just a few years junior to him coming up the ranks. They had served together in the Punjab Regiment, where Haroon had earned his battle scars. His selection for this mission was Misbah's preference, more than seniority for the command.

"Haroon," the General explained. "I'd like Kamal to be heavily involved in the planning and execution of this operation. He has spent time on ground and knows the targets personally. Their intelligence value is a top priority for this op."

"General, I have had a chance to review Kamal's military record," Haroon commented, as if Kamal was not even in the room. "I have also reviewed the intelligence that he

gathered and the interrogation of the detainee. I am honored to have him on the op, sir.”

It was one thing to have the Director General of the service recommend you for an assault op on a target, but to have the commander of the op speak with such respect for his past work...Kamal stood up a little straighter, squaring his shoulders.

“There are three objectives that must be achieved for this op to be considered successful,” the General continued. “First, all ground and air defense must be neutralized otherwise our birds will be sitting ducks. Second, there are three — Mullah Fazal, Imam Shahid and Sheikh Afzal — that must be captured and returned for interrogation. I want them alive, Haroon,” the General explained.

“Injured?” Haroon asked with a grin.

“Injured, yes. Mortally wounded no,” the General replied, reinforcing his demand that these men were to be interrogated post-operation. “Lastly, I want that base leveled. The tunnels, the compound, everything...” he said with a touch of steel in his voice.

“Sir, what about the weapons cache?” Kamal asked. The weapons found on the compound would help ascertain which countries were supporting the jihadis.

“Yes, get as many of the weapons crates as you can,” the General said. “I know all will be impossible, but get as many as possible before leveling the place. Any questions?”

The two men looked at each other, shaking their heads after a moment of consideration. “Then, let’s re-convene in two weeks with an operational briefing,” the General said, dismissing the men.

Since that meeting, Haroon and Kamal had moved to the SSG training facility in Cherat, sequestering themselves to a barracks. They had taken it over, removing bunks to accommodate pin boards, white boards, video equipment and a refrigerator. Three squares were brought from the mess hall directly to them, eliminating unneeded interactions with outsiders that could raise security concerns.

The first days inside the barracks was spent discussing potential breach options to determine the most effective course of action. Both men had strong opinions about their approach, citing their own battlefield experience as reasons for and against specific tactics, leading to long periods of silence and quiet study before resuming the argument.

“With all due respect sir,” Kamal said, perturbed. “That has to be the dumbest insertion plan I have ever heard.”

“Watch yourself, Captain,” Haroon advised. “I’m still your commanding officer.”

“Sir, that’s why I said with all due respect,” Kamal kept his face deadpan. Haroon looked at him suspiciously.

“What, in your years of experience, tells you this won’t work?” Haroon commented sarcastically. “I *know* I have more battlefield experience than...”

“Then please use that battlefield experience, sir,” Kamal said, interrupting him.

Haroon took a deep breath, controlling the urge to smash Kamal’s straight nose in with

a stapler. "I still think that a controlled attack on a border post will give us the cover that we require to move personnel and equipment into position. We know that route is used by smugglers bringing arms and drugs into Pakistan," Haroon explained, pointing to the pins he had placed in the map. "We move the current personnel out of the post and hit it hard."

"Sir, again, with all due respect," Kamal said. "That would close the border to any traffic. The Sheikh wouldn't attempt to cross knowing that the military was on the alert and looking for whoever hit their base. He won't risk it."

"There are a number of things that work against us in this equation that we must account for," Kamal continued. "First, we can't trust the Frontier Constabulary. We don't know which side they're playing for. That means that the roads are out. Second, we have a target that is in the wind in Afghanistan. We need him to come back, which means keeping the border open no matter what. Your plan makes these things impossible."

Haroon shook his head at Kamal's commentary. "Not everything is black and white, Captain. Sometimes, we have to work within grey areas."

"Sir, I don't need a lesson on the boundaries of military combat," Kamal replied abruptly. "I live in that grey area...you've read my file..."

"Look, Kamal," Haroon began. "I know you've been involved in many covert operations in your career, but this is not covert. This is a hit and run."

"Again, with due respect sir, I disagree," Kamal retorted, struggling to keep control of his anger. "There is a part of this assault that must be covert in order for this to be successful. Anyone figures out what's going on and the camp will be warned...the op is over. We can't risk it with this many HVTs inside."

"You obviously have a better idea," Haroon replied. "Why don't you share?"

Kamal leaned back in his chair, glancing between Haroon and the map board, before getting up.

"May I remove your pins sir?" Kamal asked, reaching for the pushpins placed around the map.

Haroon looked over to another map board in the corner. "Why don't you use that one instead?" Kamal looked over, pushing the current one out of the way with his foot. He heard it slam against the wall as he pulled the fresh board forward in its place.

He moved around the board, pushing pins into different locations, considering his plan based on the locations of the pins, before turning back to Haroon and taking a deep breath.

"Sir, my proposal is targeted and resource driven," Kamal started. "Since we know the smuggling routes into Pakistan are here and here," Kamal explained, "we need to keep our men out of these areas. We also have FC posts and bases here, here and here that we must also avoid, otherwise the operation will be compromised." The Brigadier nodded, agreeing



with Kamal's assumptions.

"If we put two teams in play at the Panjkara and Babukara rivers, we would be able to provide surveillance and quick response to the assault when it begins. They would be roughly twelve hours by foot from the camp, but no one would suspect them because they're not along any of the routes that are patrolled by the FC or used by the smugglers."

"Quick response teams?" Haroon inquired. "What for?"

"I would use them for a few purposes," Kamal explained. "First, I would want to them to cripple the FC's communications capabilities so that when we start our assault, they're unable to respond in force. Second, with a few hours advance notification, they could take out the snipers and the anti-aircraft weapons giving our birds clear access into the camp."

"What is your force personnel requirement?" Haroon asked.

"Two teams of two snipers, three explosives specialists, two navigators and one signals operator. Fifteen men total."

Haroon was impressed with the critical thinking and strategy that Kamal had put before him. This was an excellent plan that would deliver the first objective and clear the path for the rest of the assault team. "So you would bring commandos in from the air and supporting infantry from?" Haroon asked.

"Sir, our men are trained to attack from the air. It was a core requirement in our training," Kamal said. "With the FC posts compromised, we can roll our infantry right down Agency Road without major resistance. Once their defenses are compromised, we can hit them hard and fast...assuming that we move the contingents to the relevant bases before the covert operation."

"What are you thinking in terms of equipment on ground?" Haroon asked, more intrigued with the plan as Kamal expounded on it.

"Transport vehicles, sir," Kamal answered without hesitation. "No tanks, no APCs, no heavy weaponry. It would draw too much attention."

Haroon leaned back in his chair, propping his feet up on the table and tapping the butt of a pen against his chin. Kamal stood motionless for a moment, then grabbed his cigarette pack from the table, taking one and slipping it between his lips. His tongue shot out to moisten them before placing it there. He knew the plan he had put forward was strong and with the Brigadier's experience, it would become an executable plan. Now, he just had to wait for the Brigadier to agree with him.

"Listen, Kamal," the Brigadier said, spinning the pen between his lips. "Let's break for fifteen and we'll come back to discuss this further," he said, dropping his feet to the floor with a thud and stretching as he stood up. "Write this up so that we have it documented."

Kamal watched him walk out the door. *Fucker*, he thought to himself. He waited a few minutes to make sure that he cleared earshot, then in his best imitation of the Brigadier, he repeated, "Write this up so that we have it documented. You little arrogant shit." He

grabbed a blank pad and pen as he pulled his chair to the table to draw out and detail the assault plan.

Like clockwork, Haroon returned to the barracks fifteen minutes later with a few leather-bound books under his arm. Behind him entered one of the soldiers that was charged with guarding them carrying another stack of similar books. "I brought up some reading material to facilitate our discussion," he said, smiling.

Haroon placed the books on the table and instructed the soldier to do the same. Kamal checked out the spines realizing that he intended to teach him battlefield tactics to prove whatever points he was going to expound before declaring his assault plan faulty. Haroon had been an instructor at the War College in Nowshera, and he had been trained at the US Army College. "Did you get the documentation done that I asked for?" he asked.

"Ah, no sir," Kamal answered, doing his best to hold back the response he really wanted to give. "I'm still drawing out the map with troop placement."

"You can come back to that later," Haroon commented. "If we're going to make your plan work, we need to understand what equipment will be needed. That is what these books are for," he said placing his hand on the first stack.

Kamal stopped writing as if someone had just shot him. *He's accepting the plan? My luck can't be this good.* "Sir, I started to put together a list of the equipment needed based on the teams in the theatre," he commented, holding up a second pad that contained equipment, weapons and munitions requirements broken down by operational teams. The Brigadier reached out, taking the pad from Kamal and reading the information listed.

"This is a good start," Haroon said. "But we need to get into the details. It takes the Army about a week to ten days to move the necessary equipment from other bases and theaters."

The discussion was nowhere near complete, Kamal knew, but he was going to savor this victory.

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The night had not been as restful as the General had hoped. After the long journey from Islamabad by road, he had hoped to find a few more comforts of home once he got to The Sanctuary, but was forced to settle into a creaking bed with a lopsided mattress and the ever-steady hum of a generator outside. It made him remember why he kept his base of operations at five-star hotels, but the dramatic situational shift in Pakistan forced him to make his visit more low-key. He woke to find his sat phone vibrating against the side of the nightstand, suspended by the charger, the only thing keeping it from bouncing on the floor. He reached over, pulling it back from the edge and unplugging the charger as he answered.

“Good morning, General,” said the familiar voice.

“Hello, David,” the General said. “I don’t know how good of a morning it is. How are things in the civilized world?”

“Three thousand thread count sheets, fine scotch and beautiful women,” Northwright said, clanking the ice in his glass. “I’m guessing you have found hell to be...well, hell?”

“It’s hotter than fuck all here,” el-Yahad joked. “The air conditioning doesn’t even provide any comfort.”

Northwright laughed, taking a swig from his scotch. “I know, my friend. The heat in that area is like being in a special part of hell. What’s new out there? What do our friends have to say?”

“They sent some towelhead to transport me from Islamabad. Bastard talked my ear off,” el-Yahad told him. “He gave me some cock and bull story about operational readiness and some test missions but wouldn’t give any details. Said that the Sheikh would brief me here.”

“Test missions?” Northwright asked inquisitively. “That doesn’t sound good. What the fuck have they done? Blown up a donkey cart?” he said, laughing.

“David, I think they did the hit on Canary,” el-Yahad said hesitantly. “Did you order that?”

“Are you crazy?” Northwright voice boomed into the receiver. “Canary was our asset. We spent twenty years grooming him for that position. Why would I order a hit?”

“I don’t think they got that memo. I’ll know more today, but there’s some connection to the camp.” For a moment, there was silence on the other end.

“These towelheads think they can decide something that important?” When he finally spoke, Northwright’s voice was laced with anger. “Find out and update me.”

“I ran into one of your old friends during a stopover. He spoke highly of you.”

“Are you sure he was a friend? They don’t tend to speak highly of me.”

“There was a picture of you with him and two other men.”

“Abbas, you need to be more specific. I know a number of people over there from my time with The Company.”

“He said his name was Sami Ullah,” el-Yahad said pausing to gauge Northwright’s reaction to the name. “He told me about you, Andrews and Davidson. How long were you in Pakistan with the Company?”

Northwright was uncharacteristically quiet, remembering his days training mujahideens alongside the Pakistan Army. He recalled the days of free flowing dollars, nasty guesthouse rooms and training sessions in the mountains. His mind turned to his fallen colleagues and the memories they had shared while stationed there. “Andrews was a good man,” Northwright finally said. “The Northern Alliance took him out with a mortar shell. There weren’t enough pieces to send back to the family for the funeral.”

“What about Davidson? Is he alive or dead?”

“Shit man, how would I know?” Northwright retorted after a slight hesitation. “He disappeared a few weeks after Andrews died. We had bunks next to each other. I woke up one morning and he was gone. No one has seen him since.”

“I think you’re wrong about that, David,” the General said, but was interrupted by a knocking at the door. “Listen, someone is knocking. I think the towelheads are up. We’ll discuss this later,” he hung up before Northwright could reply. Rising from the bed, el-Yahad looked into the mirror near the door, checking to make sure that he didn’t have anything out of sorts before opening the door.

“Sir, they are waiting for you in the meeting room,” the young boy said in his broken English, quickly turning and rushing down the hall.

“Where is the meeting room?” el-Yahad yelled, hoping to get some response before he disappeared out of sight.

“Across the hall,” he called back without turning his head.

The General looked across at the door that was slightly ajar before turning and closing the door to his room. Before he joined them, he wanted to collect anything that could be searched while he was with them. Shoving all the files from the coffee table and bed into his briefcase, he snapped the clasp closed, turning his key to lock it before entering the bathroom to quickly get ready.

The General emerged from his room fifteen minutes later, briefcase in hand, crossing the hall and entering the meeting room to find Sheikh Atif and Mullah Fazal waiting. On a table in the corner was a breakfast spread that matched any of the hotel buffets he had enjoyed in the past.

“Ah, good morning General sahib,” the Sheikh said, wiping the breadcrumbs from the corner of his mouth. He stood and crossed the room to get his old friend. “It has been too long. I think the last time we met was...”

“Jordan two years ago,” el-Yahad completed his sentence. “You look well. The Mullah must take good care of you.”

“*Al-hum-do-lillah*, the brothers take excellent care of me here and in Jalalabad,” the Sheikh commented with a smile. “Please get some breakfast and join us,” motioning to the expansive buffet that had been prepared in his honor.

The next few hours were spent discussing activities at the facility, recruitment, training and financial status. Although he had heard most of the information from Nabeel, he wanted the Sheikh to give him a more detailed picture. The Sheikh tried very hard to avoid el-Yahad’s difficult questions, but he persisted like a Rottweiler who had cornered a cat. He wasn’t going to give up without the answers he wanted.

“Nabeel used the term operational readiness while briefing me,” the General said. “What does that mean here and how can you make that pronouncement?”

“Operational readiness means that we have reached a trained efficiency to be able to select targets of our choice,” the Mullah explained.

“How are you judging that, Mullah sahib?” el-Yahad inquired. “Have you carried out any test missions?”

Fazal and Atif looked at each other, wondering who would provide the answer to that and the likely follow-up questions. The Mullah leaned forward to expand on his statement, but the Sheikh stopped him, shaking his head no. “What would you consider proof, General?” he asked.

El-Yahad stared at the Sheikh, wondering what he had stopped the Mullah from saying. In the process, he caught himself comparing the cracks and crows feet on his face with the man in the photograph he had seen earlier. *There are similarities, but is this the same man?* The Sheikh interrupted his thoughts, repeating the question.

“I can tell you from a military perspective that we don’t use that term unless it has been tested,” the General qualified the earlier question. “What was the test?”

“We kidnapped and interrogated two men from their place of employment,” the Sheikh said with a sneer. “Sadly, both men died during the interrogation, a common occurrence during high-pressure situations, as you already know from your own experience.”

“What intelligence was gathered? How were these two men selected?”

“Both men had recently joined the cause. The skills Dawood displayed during training were more controlled and developed than any other recruit that we have had here. We felt that he had used Kaleem, a former student at Imam Shahid’s madrassah, to infiltrate the camp,” the Sheikh explained, pulling a file from under the table and handing it to the General. “This is the intelligence gathered from Kaleem.”

The General pulled the file close, tapping his fingers on it a few times; he was watching the Sheikh’s movements closely. He pulled his glasses from their case, wiping them a few times before slipping them onto his face. He turned his gaze from the Sheikh to the neatly typed pages in the file, but something caught his attention on the second page of the transcript.

“Is this correct?” the General asked, scratching the back of his head. “You kidnapped an intelligence asset and killed him? Are you stupid or just blind to what you may have done?” The General stood to move around the table.

“He didn’t admit to that during his interrogation...” the Mullah said before being interrupted by the General.

“Didn’t admit? My God, you’re stupid,” the General yelled. “The ISI puts every asset through extensive torture exercises to test their breaking point,” the General continued, his anger boiling over as he remembered the interrogations that he had conducted and overseen of confirmed ISI operatives in Syria. “They don’t break!”

“He’s dead. No one will find the body,” the Sheikh said. “We have been assured.”

The General froze in his tracks, not able to comprehend what the Sheikh had just said. "Are you telling me that someone else did the interrogation?" the General yelled.

"He's one of our assets," the Mullah said confidentially. "He will never tell."

"Where is this asset?" the General inquired. "Can I meet him?"

"No," the Sheikh replied. "His family told us he crossed into Afghanistan for the time being."

"You are sure...this isn't something that is *going* to happen, correct?" the General asked.

"He is in Afghanistan with our brothers," the Mullah said, more confidently.

"Okay, that's good. The farther he stays from Pakistani intelligence the better," the General said before pausing a moment as a thought entered his mind. "Anything else?"

"Just one other thing, General sahib," the Sheikh said. "But I fear this will upset you again when I tell you."

The color ran from the General's face. *Are my worst fears coming true? Did they do it?* "Did you kill the Prime Minister?" he asked, fearful of the answer that was to come.

"Only tactical support, we didn't pull the trigger, as you would say," the Mullah said.

"So what is it?" the General asked impatient with the drama. "What is going to upset me?"

The Sheikh rose from the table, crossing over to speak with el-Yahad privately. "We have killed two intelligence officers," the Sheikh whispered in his ear, slowly moving around behind him.

"Dawood and..."

"You," the Sheikh said as he slid the razor sharp blade across the General's throat.

The General stumbled a few steps around the room, blood beginning to spurt from the cut, before collapsing on the floor. He tried to grasp his neck to stop the blood loss, but his efforts were in vain. With the blood rushing from his throat, he felt life slipping from his soul.

"General, can you hear me? This was not my decision," the Sheikh said, almost saddened by what he had just done. "Moshe made this call," he continued, pulling his cell phone out. He had gotten some blood on his expensive handset, forcing him to wipe his hands and handset before dialing.

"Sir, it's done," he said to the party on the other side of the call. "We'll dispose of the body and all evidence...thank you sir," he finished, hanging up the call and turning the phone off to avoid any attempts to track the location.

"Bashir! Hamza!" the Sheikh yelled through the door. "Bashir! Hamza!"

Two men entered the room to find the General lying lifeless in a large pool of his own blood. Their faces showed no shock or surprise to either the scene before them or the murder of the General. They scooped the General's body between them and carried it out. Another man stepped in with cleaning supplies to mop up the blood and wipe the walls

where it had spurted. He moved quickly to sanitize the area and left as quickly and quietly as he entered.

The Sheikh returned to the table, snatching the General's open briefcase from the chair to remove the remaining files. Placing them around the table, he looked at Fazal who was still shocked by the attack. "Fazal...Fazal!" he yelled at his friend, barely drawing a reaction from him. "Fazal, we have a great deal to do. Can you help?"

Fazal reached forward, grabbing the Sheikh's arm. "What the hell did you just do?" he asked, confused.

"I did what needed to be done," Atif said with steel in his eyes and iron in his voice. "My benefactors are not providing you with everything for a jihad. You are providing us the tools and network to wage a war against anyone and anything that opposes us," he gripped Fazal's hand so he could not pull away. "The General was a threat and expendable...don't put yourself in the same position."

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It was the dead of night when the four Cobra helicopters climbed over the ridge around The Sanctuary. The area was already billowing smoke into the air from the coordinated explosions that disabled the anti-aircraft weapons and sniper posts. The Army snipers had taken up positions where their own had sat moments before. Some were firing rocket launchers and RPGs at the terrorists as they emerged from the tunnels within the mountains, other were providing cover fire to the explosives specialists so they could move closer to the compound itself. From the road, four additional transport trucks full of soldiers were streaming into the battle to engage with the few terrorists that evaded the sniper fire.

The Cobras moved in quickly, mounted automatic weapons blazing clear a path. They moved into support positions to allow the two Hueys to land, where the commandos scattered out shooting anything that moved. Empty, the Hueys leapt back into the air and retreated back over the ridge. With the main compound surrounded, the explosives specialists set the charges along each wall to create breach points. The Cobras opened fire into the compound, picking off the security guards on the balconies and below on the ground. Seconds later, four simultaneous explosions lit up the night sky as the walls came tumbling down. Two of the Cobras had to pull back due to the blowback from the explosions, but they re-engaged minutes later. The commandos breached the boundary and entered, their rounds shredding bodies where they stood. The air filled with the stench of sulfur and burning flesh.

Kamal led the core strike team into the house, picking off the security guards as they stepped out of the shadows to engage them. The ground floor provided no real resistance

since most of the guards had moved outside to attempt to keep the soldiers from entering the building, making the progression inside that much easier. When they reached the second floor, the scene changed as Mullah Fazal's family emerged from the various rooms screaming.

"Get down on the ground!" Kamal yelled in Pashto. "On the ground or we will fire!" His orders brought three to a standstill, but three others rushed at the security forces. Two of the commandos opened fire, shooting out their legs in the hope that would stop the progression. They barely heard the "*Allah hu Akbar*" shout before the hall filled with fire as one of the attackers detonated a suicide vest. The strike teams had tried to take cover, but because of the small-enclosed space, many now had pink mist and body parts to pick from their visors and uniforms. "Clear the rooms," Kamal yelled to the second team behind him. "No heroics boys. If anyone disobeys, put a round in their head immediately." Kamal's attention was diverted for a second as another strike team entered the house at the explosion. "Taimur," Kamal called down to his colleague. "Clear the rooms and join us on the third floor. We're going to breach." He tapped five men on the shoulder as he passed, "Come with me!"

They took up positions outside the bunker security door, waiting for reinforcements to join them from below. With all the firing outside the boundary, things inside were eerily quiet. Kamal swung his rifle around his back and pulled the Glock from his sidearm. With two bullets, he shattered the surveillance camera into thousands of miniature pieces. "Now you see what we see," Kamal yelled at the security door. He signaled his explosives team to set the charges. "Just like the training mission, Tariq," Kamal said to the team leader, as he passed his right side.

This same assault team had been running training drills in the mountains of Khyber for the past two weeks. Each facet of the assault was simulated with Rangers brought up from Punjab and Karachi. Working across ten different locations, the teams developed a clear understanding of how quickly they had to move and which points they needed to control. Every drill culminated with a meeting where each team debated how the operation could be made more efficient and effective. The next drill incorporated the most viable feedback. Everything had been in preparation for this.

With Kamal leading the core strike team on ground, Haroon oversaw the entire assault from one of the Cobras flying above, relaying instructions and information to them via the wireless. Kamal felt Bilal's tap on his shoulder. Captain Bilal Adnan led the Beta strike team that had entered with Kamal's team. "All clear below, Captain," Bilal said. "Two floors cleared. Seven extracted, sixteen dead."

"Women and children?" Kamal asked, remembering the five-year-old on the second floor.

"Three children, four women located and extracted," he said, pausing a moment. "Five



women, nine guards neutralized. One no gender, just pink mist and body parts.”

Kamal looked over at Bilal with shock and surprise, “Five women?” he asked.

“Three had vests, two came out firing,” Bilal said. “I have two injured on our side, extracted by Captain Aleem’s team.”

“What’s Aleem’s status?”

“Aleem is down one, KIA,” Bilal said. “They are extracting and moving up to support.”

Kamal glanced around, quickly taking a headcount, as he slipped his Glock back into his sidearm and swung his rifle back around. “Tariq! Blow the door,” he called.

“Fire in the hole,” was the last thing he heard before the explosion ripped the door from its hinges, filling the stairwell with smoke and shrapnel. The men inside opened fire and the strike teams responded instantly. The hall was full of smoke and firing for a few minutes, but slowly the firing came to a halt.

“In pairs, clear the rooms,” Kamal hollered to his men. “Watch your six!” he said, as the groups entered the corridor looking for stragglers. Throwing open doors, the sound of gunfire erupted intermittently, starting and stopping as the targets were spotted and neutralized. It was Bilal and Sheraz that hit the door with the Sheikh and his security detail inside. Kamal turned around just as the sound of automatic fire broke out and watched Sheraz crumble to the ground.

“Sheraz!” Kamal yelled as moved to support Bilal. “Bilal, get him out of fire line Move!” he yelled, squeezing off rounds into the room to provide cover for Sheraz from the doorway. Bilal swung his weapon around and grabbed Sheraz’s arm, pulling him aside.

“Sir...how bad...is it?” Sheraz asked blood flowing from his mouth and nose. Bilal looked down to see the bullet hole in the Kevlar, dead center of his chest. He doesn’t have long, Bilal thought to himself.

“You’re fine, Sheraz,” Bilal encouragingly said to him. “Just a graze for you and me. Now, don’t pansy out on us and die,” he said but just as the words came out, Sheraz coughed, laboring to breathe as the life slipped out of him. Kamal had moved to them arriving just as Sheraz lost consciousness. He reached down and checked his pulse. “He’s gone,” he said finding nothing, pausing to take Sheraz’s hand and close his eyes.

Watching Sheraz die hardened something within the strike team members. For Kamal and Bilal, who had been stationed in Kashmir with him for eighteen months, they felt like they lost a brother in arms. He had a wife and two minor children, Kamal thought. *We need to be able to tell them he died a hero.*

“Sir, make it two KIA,” Kamal called across the wireless to Haroon. “Sheraz is dead.”

There was intermittent firing from the room, both out the door and through the walls. Those inside were doing their best to eliminate anyone, but they had prepared for this scenario. The strike teams settled behind the facing walls so that any stray bullets would

pierce the concrete, not their Kevlar. Kamal raised a fist in the air waiting for everyone to ready themselves. The fist changed to five outstretched fingers, counting down slowly.

The gunfire erupted again, just as furious as on the ground floor. The strike team's bullets found human flesh, slowing the return fire from inside the room. *They aren't going to let us take them alive*, Kamal thought to himself. *First class tickets to hell coming up*. Bilal pulled the flash bang from his pack and rolled it into the room. The counter measure blinded and deafened the guards, allowing the men to enter and fire headshots into the remaining guards surrounding the Sheikh. Three men were seriously wounded, an additional five were killed inside the room. The security forces had lost another two men in the breach.

The Sheikh stood in the corner, Kalashnikov in hand. The single guard left protecting him was wounded and unable to move. Mullah Fazal lay alone on the floor, bleeding from three bullet wounds in his torso. Bilal pulled his sidearm and fired three shots into the guard's head. "Always put the dog out of his misery," he said with a gnarl, turning his weapon to the Sheikh. When the guard fell away from the Sheikh, both men noticed that he was already bleeding from a bullet that had hit his hip.

"Bilal!" Kamal yelled. "We need him alive." Bilal smiled maliciously and fired two shots into each of the Sheikh's shoulders, causing him to drop the weapon in his hand. Kamal went straight to the Sheikh, smacking him in the face with the butt of his rifle. He tried to search him, but the Sheikh was uncooperative, hunching away. Kamal pressed his Glock to his balls. "Keep fighting, you son of a bitch," Kamal growled in his ear. "It would be a pleasure."

One of the men called, "Bomb," before planting a bullet into a man's head that had emerged from another corner of the room unnoticed. He saw the dead man's switch in his hand and raced towards him, draping his body over the man as the suicide vest detonated, covering the room in pink mist. The men quickly searched the corners again for any hidden doors or compartments that could be hiding more combatants.

Two strike teams moved the Sheikh and Mullah to a waiting Cobra, while the others rampaged the offices on the top floor. They filled black bags with files, photographs, journals and hard drives. The cabinets were full of files, some with names, photographs and locations, others contained names of imams and madrassahs that were part of the network. The intelligence find was enormous. It would take weeks to work through all of it and taking the leaders alive was an added advantage. As Kamal opened and cleared the cabinets, he stumbled on drawers full of files emblazoned with the logos of intelligence agencies. *What are these doing here?*

Kamal pulled out all the files, handing over all but the last few to a colleague to carry out of the compound. He made a last check around the room for anything he might have missed. Other teams were doing the same, combing all the rooms in the mountainside for weapons, documents and stray members of the camp. It took them less than an hour to

sweep the camp.

Climbing back into the helicopter with Haroon and the two HVTs, the men exchanged smiles and a handshake for the successful completion of the mission. The two Hueys, loaded with their payloads, reached a hover alongside the Cobras and the Brigadier ordered everyone out of the area. Waiting for the space to clear, Haroon looked around to make sure that all military personnel were clear. He looked over to see that the al-Qaeda flag that had been flying above the observation post when they had arrived three hours ago had been replaced with a Pakistani flag.

“Gentlemen, I thought you would all want to see this,” Haroon called over the comms unit. “Pilots move us to a safe distance.” Each Cobra passed the Pakistani flag, freshly hung above the once terrorist camp, filling each member of the strike force with pride at the enormity of the task that had been completed.

As the helicopters turned over the ridge, Haroon addressed his team. “Tariq, the venue is clear. It’s showtime.” Haroon was grinning. A few seconds later, explosions rocked the entire valley as the compound, tunnels and any contents remaining illuminated the early morning sky in a blaze of glory. “Let’s go home, boys!” the Brigadier said.

The Cobras turned and disappeared over the ridge. They could hear the *azaan* filling the morning sky over the villages they passed.

## CHAPTER 18

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“In the early hours of 17th November, 1996, the Pakistan Army conducted an assault on a terrorist training facility in Khyber Agency,” Prime Minister Ahsan Chaudhry began. “The camp was the operational base of the group who planned and executed the assassination of Prime Minister Azam Shah. This was the successful culmination of six months of intensive investigations involving law enforcement agencies, civilian intelligence agencies and the Inter-Service Intelligence division of the Pakistan Army,” he paused. He seemed to be struggling with a surge of emotions, apparent to almost everyone in the room.

“To the family of Azam Shah and the citizens of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, I am honored to be able to announce that the people responsible for Azam Shah’s death have been brought to justice, and the terrorist camp has been destroyed,” Chaudhry said. “The Army will be arranging a full briefing later this afternoon to explain the operation, share the evidence gathered and answer any media questions. The entire briefing will be telecast live on PTV so that the nation may share in the pride that we have today for our Army. Pakistan Zindabad,” he concluded and the screen changed to a shot of the waving Pakistani flag, as every televised address from the Prime Minister did. He sat for a few minutes at his desk while journalists took photographs for the morning editions of their newspapers.

“You did well, Prime Minister,” Major General Shaukat Paracha said, collecting the pages of the speech from his desk. The Prime Minister usually preferred to have his team of speechwriters prepare public statements from his office, but in this case the ISPR had provided the words they wanted conveyed to the public.

“They were your words, General,” Chaudhry said. “I didn’t do anything but read them into the camera,” he continued, a hint of sarcasm underpinning his words.

“And you did that well, sir,” Paracha said calmly, slipping the pages into his portfolio. Avoiding the Prime Minister’s eyes, he walked out.

Chaudhry’s job was done. The one thing that had plagued his Premiership was resolved. He felt the weight lift from his shoulders, but it was replaced with a deep sadness for his friend and family. Now, he had to return to the business of government and solving the many other issues in the purview of his office.

This was a showcase, redemption for the security services that had been demonized in the print media since Azam Shah’s assassination. Today was the Army’s opportunity to demonstrate their value to the nation. Major General Shaukat Paracha, Director General of the Inter Services Public Relations division of the Army, oversaw the arrangements of briefing journalists, preparing information packets and managing the release of the

‘treasure trove’ of information that had been gathered after The Sanctuary was overtaken and secured. He had wanted to hold the press conference immediately after the raid, but the high command delayed it to carry out additional raids on camps that were associated with The Sanctuary. The Army had launched attacks on every madrassah and masjid that was listed in the documents collected, and had swept up every individual suspected of involvement with the terrorists. It had been one of the largest cleanup operations in Pakistan’s history, stretching across the country in urban and rural areas.

“Waqas! Waqas!” Paracha called out, slowly raising the tenor of his voice. “What are these doing here?”

“Sir, they were in the boxes of material sent over from GHQ.”

“Just because they sent it over,” Paracha began, “doesn’t mean that we need to show it to the media. It’s included in the list of materials collected, that’s enough.”

“Yes, sir,” Waqas said, pulling the stacks of files off the table.

The Major General was known for his meticulous attention to detail, always keeping military protocol in mind when speaking to media personnel. He was the public face for the Pakistan Army, relaying information and answering questions for domestic and international journalists. He was constantly in the public eye, smiling and laughing as he delivered the army’s pressers. This, however, would be a much more charged affair. Even more so because it would be broadcast live on PTV.

Paracha was busy reviewing the information packets and other items that had been recovered when his aide came in and handed him a folded piece of paper. His attention was on his task, so he slipped the note into his pocket to read when he was free. His aide cleared his throat, drawing Paracha’s attention.

“What is it, havildar?” Paracha asked.

“Sir, the note,” the aide said hesitantly. “I am supposed to report back to GHQ once you have read it and added your comments.”

Glaring at the aide, Paracha pulled the note from his pocket, annoyed that he hadn’t been told that in the first place. Reading the contents, he pulled his pen from his chest pocket and scribbled his comments, folding it back up when he finished. “Next time tell me when you give me the note,” he snapped at the havildar as he returned the folded paper to him.

“Yes, sir,” the aide replied abruptly. “Will not happen again,” he said, turning and rushing out of the briefing room.

The media had already started to file in, filling their designated seats based on the chart provided by the ISPR. The room was a classroom converted into a briefing room for this occasion, with theatre-style seating. To one side hung all the flags of the regiments of the army, neatly pressed and just far enough from the wall to hang free. Along the back wall hung the framed photographs of Chiefs of Army Staff, from Ayub Khan to Amjad Ali

The front of the room, which was normally a podium with the Pakistan and army flags to either side, had been transformed. In its place was a table for three men with a large screen to the right. A buzzer sounded inside the hall to let everyone know the briefing would start within the next fifteen minutes and the room began to fill up quickly.

Major General Shaukat Paracha, Brigadier Haroon Ahmed and an aide entered the room from a backstage area to the left. Paracha took the center seat with Haroon and the aide seated to either side. As the seats filled up, the three men noticed the abundance of cameras and personnel from international media outlets. Paracha was media savvy but for Haroon, this was an environment that he had never faced. Paracha leaned over to whisper in his ear.

“Cover the basics of the op. Don’t give them too much detail.”

Haroon nodded, but his focus was on finding the foreign media in the audience. *Maybe if I can spot them, it will put me more at ease.*

“Good afternoon and welcome to the ISPR. I am Major General Shaukat Paracha and I’ll be providing the briefing in both Urdu and English so that everyone is able to clearly understand the information that we are presenting today. Please hold all questions until we have completed the presentation,” Paracha’s timbering voice filled the auditorium. “The Prime Minister has already outlined the basics of what happened, but I, along with Brigadier Haroon, will be covering that and more information in detail.” He stopped to take a sip of water.

“Based on intelligence from an informant, the Pakistan Army began surveillance and intelligence-gathering of a large training camp located in the hills of Khyber Agency,” Paracha began. “Over the course of the past six months, various law enforcement agencies, civilian intelligence and our ISI operatives in the region were able to provide a clear picture of the activities of the camp and a direct connection to the assassination of former Prime Minister Azam Shah. Brigadier Haroon Ahmed will take you through the details of the operation, keeping in mind security concerns about potential retaliatory strikes.”

Haroon leaned forward and pulled the microphones closer to him. He paused, hesitant about what to say even though he had been thoroughly prepared by Paracha and his team. He cleared his throat and began.

“In the early hours of 17th November, four Cobra attack helicopters and two Huey helicopters carrying SSG commandos and supported by ground forces launched an assault on a camp located in the foothills in Khyber Agency. We are not identifying the exact location because on-going intelligence and operations are in progress. The assault lasted approximately four hours, after which the camp was destroyed with explosive devices and aerial bombing from F-16s launched from Peshawar Air Base.” He paused to allow the journalists to note the information provided and to take a drink to moisten his parched throat. The journalists started to look up again and he quickly found his place in his notes.

“Approximately two hundred terrorists were killed during the assault and close to one hundred were captured. Twenty members of the army embraced *shahadat*, while another fifty-three sustained injuries of varying severity. After the assault, a great deal of material including hard drives, photographs and files were collected, which are listed in your media packets. They will be shown to you after the briefing is completed.” Haroon paused again to find the listing he had referenced, holding it up so that the journalists could find it in their packets.

“It was in this material that we found the plans and names of those involved in Prime Minister Azam Shah’s assassination. The names were matched with photographs and compared to those who were killed during the raid,” he continued as the journalists flipped through the media packets looking for photographs and names. He could see their expressions change as they began to understand the sheer volume of information that had been collected. He fought to keep the mental smirk from appearing on his face. He handed the briefing back to Paracha. “Major General Paracha...” He leaned back in his chair, turning to Paracha. The room began to buzz with hushed discussions.

Paracha watched as the journalists showed each other snippets of information from the media packet, each scribbling notes and circling items in the provided documents. He quickly repeated the information in English for the international journalists, repeatedly referencing the numbers that Haroon had shared so that the international community would understand how big of a success this was for the Pakistan Army. He looked around the room and gauged the tension before opening the floor. “Are there any questions?”

The room erupted as journalists shot their hands in the air and called out, trying to get Paracha’s attention.

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Islamabad’s diplomatic community was buzzing with the success of the operation. The phones in the offices of the President, Prime Minister and Chief of Army Staff had not stopped ringing since the Premier’s televised address earlier that morning. They had known something was happening in Islamabad for a few days, but no one in the corridors of power had broken the silence before the formal announcement, a great feat for a government that was typically filled with leaks. While the politicians were busy taking bows and enjoying the accolades, General Amjad Ali’s call sheet continued to grow, though he had no plans to return any of the calls. It was not in their nature to take a victory lap for doing their jobs and the top brass didn’t believe that victory was in hand yet.

Inside a hall within the General Headquarters of the army, keys clicked on keyboards, printers spat out pages and copiers hummed. A team of cryptographers, researchers and

intelligence operatives were locked away with the material recovered from The Sanctuary. They were connecting the data between financiers, sleeper cells and planned attacks, drafting dossiers under each of the operational code-names. They thought they had all the data, but that couldn't have been further from the truth.

Prepared dossiers were moved out of the building to another more secure building on the premises, where a more advanced team was reviewing the intelligence files, linking foreign agencies to the operational code-names. The expanded dossiers were marked with code-level clearances, some were redacted and slotted into file boxes to be reviewed by the relevant heads of government, law enforcement, intelligence and military officials. Twice daily, the boxes were transported via an unmarked vehicle to the ISI headquarters in Islamabad for further consideration, before being distributed to the relevant offices.

Days had passed since The Sanctuary raid when one of the advanced teams stumbled on a set of files that raised more questions than answers. The files were packed with pages of financial transactions, all coming from a series of offshore numbered accounts into Pakistan. At first glance, the cryptographers thought the accounts belonged to ranking members of leading political parties, used to move laundered money back into Pakistan, but the amounts didn't make sense. Nor did the banks receiving the funds. The files and transactions became a topic of conversation among the intelligence officers in the room. As each account's transactions were collated and tabulated, the numbers made less sense, until they started to connect the code-names with the transactions. ISI officers started to create timelines between the influx of funds, the purchase of weapons and disturbances around the country, but what they were having trouble understanding was why the funds were being delivered to three cities — Karachi, Peshawar and Quetta. A set of special red dossiers was prepared for Lt. General Misbah Qadir's eyes only and transported by hand by one of the ISI officers. The team had two questions that had to be answered for everything to make sense — who was sending the funds and why Karachi, Peshawar and Quetta?

The courier made the forty-minute drive from GHQ to ISI headquarters in absolute silence. He normally chatted with his driver about the events of the day and cricket match scores, but this trip, he was lost in his own thoughts.

They had no smoking gun, nothing to connect a series of coincidences to the money trail they had stumbled upon. Nothing other than their own suspicions and those carried no weight with the Lt. General. Arriving at headquarters, he ascended the stairs to the foyer, flashing his security ID to the MPs. He moved to the elevator that would take him to the DG's office. He could feel the sweat flowing down the back of his neck and his palms moistened as the elevator climbed the floors. This was his first trip to the holy sanctum of the ISI. He had been posted in the division for seven months, but had never been in the DG's office or his vicinity. He almost pissed himself at the 'bing' from the



doors as they opened. Taking a deep breath, he started reciting *Surah Ya-sin* for Allah's protection before stepping out of the elevator.

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The Military Secretary answered the phone on the second ring.

"Office of the Chief of Army Staff," he said politely.

"I have a call from the Prime Minister's office for General Ali," a polite feminine voice responded.

"Is it the Prime Minister or one of his aides that want to speak with the General?" He didn't like having to be the gatekeeper, but if he didn't do it, he'd never hear the end of it from the General.

"Prime Minister Chaudhry is on the line waiting," she said with a polite impatience.

"One moment, please," the MS put her on hold. The hold lasted for only a few seconds, but felt much longer to the assistant waiting on the line.

"Hello," General Ali said, as the MS connected the call. "Put the Prime Minister through." The line clicked over within seconds.

"General Ali," the Premier enthusiastically said. "I am getting calls from the diplomatic corps saying that you are unavailable."

"Mr. Prime Minister, we don't take victory laps," the General commented with a sigh. "I get a call sheet every hour but I have more pressing matters to concern myself with. Politics is your business, not mine."

"General," the Premier said. "No one is asking you to take a victory lap. These diplomats are friends of Pakistan. We can't afford to offend them."

General Ali sat a moment considering the Premier's statement. It wasn't his job to appease them. These were the same diplomats who had spent months poking the ISI for not solving this heinous crime, blaming Pakistan's Army for its policy against India, and criticizing the influence they carried over the government. He had watched chiefs prior to him meeting foreign defense secretaries, state ministers and anyone else who wanted something from the army. It was during his term that the army stopped receiving visiting diplomats. In fact, he had gone to the extent of banning their entry at any military installation, including General Headquarters.

Getting no response from the General, the Prime Minister continued, "I know how averse you are to meeting these people, General. I have arranged a reception at Prime Minister House for the day after tomorrow. Please make sure you and the rest of the brass attend. My secretary will share the details with your aide."

"I will make sure we make an appearance," General Ali conceded begrudgingly, pushing a button to transfer the call back to his military secretary. He watched until the

light went off and the MS entered his office.

“Sir, should I issue a notification to the relevant Generals with the details?”

“I don’t think we have a choice, Shoaib,” the General said, lighting his cigarette. “Make sure Misbah, Asim and Haroon are notified.”

“Yes, sir,” the MS said, turning and exiting the Chief’s office.

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The entire area around Prime Minister House had been sealed the day before. Bomb-sniffing dogs, snipers and other quick response teams had been deployed at all the entrances to the area to check anyone entering or leaving. There were two sets of personnel at each checkpoint manned by the Islamabad police and the Military Police to ensure that only those with the proper credentials were allowed into the area. The diplomats had the easiest route, being able to exit the Diplomatic Enclave and travel the five kilometers straight down Constitution Avenue to the Prime Minister House, which allowed them to be the first to arrive at the reception. By the time the Army leadership arrived, the party was in full swing.

“It looks like another one of those affairs,” General Ali said to his companions with a wink and a smile. “Best behavior gentlemen. This is supposed to be in our honor.”

“We’ve got some surprises for some of the guests,” Lt. General Qadir said with a sly smile.

General Ali turned with surprise at Qadir’s comment. “You plan on approaching them here?” he asked.

“What surprises?” Lt. General Asim Junejo asked, confused by the conversation between the two men.

“Just watch the show, Asim,” Qadir replied. “Can you think of a better place to deliver this kind of information? They can’t make a scene, nor can they refute what we already know,” he said, smiling blandly.

“Just be careful, Misbah,” General Ali commented. “We have assets in each of these countries. Don’t put them in danger,” he motioned to the room full of diplomats.

“I am fully aware of that fact,” Qadir said. “But would *you* risk having this information exposed on the front pages on every newspaper around the world?”

General Ali stood lost in his own thoughts. They had this discussion privately that morning, but had not been able to agree on the best course of action. It seemed, however that the ISI brain trust had determined a plan and was ready to execute. Before General Ali could respond, the Prime Minister made his way over and joined them.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” the Prime Minister said. “Shall I introduce you?” General Ali glanced at his companions and nodded his agreement. The Prime Minister immediately

turned to face the hall and tapped his glass.

“Ladies and gentlemen. Ladies and gentleman...may I have your attention please?” Prime Minister Chaudhry said, moving to the center of the hall. “It is with great pleasure that I present our guests of honor, General Ali, a man known to all of you from many personal interactions. Lt. General Asim Junejo, our Director General, Military Operations, and Lt. General Misbah Qadir, the most feared man in the community of intelligence services. Joining them is Brigadier Haroon Ahmed, the commander of the assault team that took down the terrorist hideout and brought the assassins of former Prime Minister Azam Shah to justice. Please join me and a grateful nation in congratulating them on this incredible success.” The room filled with applause and cheers. Many of the guests approached the men to shake their hands.

People gathered around the men to personally congratulate them. In the crowd, General Ali lost visual contact with Lt. General Misbah Qadir. General Ali felt a tap on his shoulder. Turning around, he saw the US Ambassador Annie Parker before him.

“Congratulations, General,” she said, shaking his hand. “It’s nice to see the Army take a stand against the terrorists in their own backyard.”

“We tried to follow the US model, but that doesn’t seem to work well here,” the General replied, emotionless.

“The US model?” she asked, with a raised eyebrow. “What does that mean?”

“The US seems to allow militias, white supremacists and various forms of terrorists to operate within their own borders,” General Ali said with a derisive smile. “Isn’t that what Georgia, Mississippi, Idaho and the Dakotas are for?”

The General’s analysis of US domestic policy got her hot under the collar. A country and army with known ties to terrorist organizations was daring to lecture a global superpower on domestic policy? Before she could comment, however, the General decided to move on.

“What is that saying you Americans have?” he said, waving to the Chinese Ambassador across the room. “Oh yes, ‘do as I say, not as I do’; a wonderful example from the self-proclaimed leaders of the free world, Madam Ambassador. You’ll need to excuse me, one of our long-term allies is motioning for me to join them,” he said, walking away.

The General left her standing dumbfounded by the exchange. It wasn’t a hidden fact that the army didn’t like the US officials. US foreign policy in Pakistan had long been a carrot and stick relationship where the stick was used more often than the carrot. This was outside the constant support of politicians whose corruption was immense, but because they were friendly to the US and its allies, they were deemed ‘good’ for Pakistan. In the years since the end of the Afghan conflict, the US had turned its back on Pakistan, leaving it to struggle with the refugees and new security risks due to their proxy war. During the conflict, the US had flooded billions of dollars into the insurgency for weapons, training

and bribes. Once it was over, the fattened calf still existed but there was no longer anything to feed them. The same camps created by the CIA to train the insurgents were now called 'terrorist' camps and their existence blamed on the Pakistani intelligence services.

Pakistan hadn't been able to turn their backs as easily.

Lt. General Qadir was surrounded by Ambassadors from the UAE, Qatar and Bahrain on the other side of the room. The Lt. General had a long relationship with the militaries in these countries both as an officer and a soldier training and serving alongside their men. They had become better friends since his promotion to Director General of the ISI. During the conversation, he noticed an old friend signal him and move out of the hall prompting Qadir to excuse himself and join him.

"Hello Mathias," Qadir said, as he exited the hall. "How are things in Berlin?"

"They don't seem as good as they are in Islamabad these days," Mathias replied in a thick German accent.

Mathias Berthold was a retired intelligence officer who had first cut his teeth with the Stasi in East Germany. When the reunification happened, he moved to the BND as a senior intelligence officer until he retired five years ago. The fifty-five year old soldier had moved from military intelligence to a private security firm that supported the German intelligence services. The two had met during Misbah's tour of Bosnia as a UN peacekeeper. They had forged a quick friendship that had lasted through the years.

"Any trouble getting in?" Qadir asked.

"Not at all, but then if Pakistani intelligence can't get me in, who can?" Mathias laughed again.

"I think the BND officers are wondering how you were able to get in here," Qadir replied with a grin, tilting his head in the direction of two men who were straining to see them. "What did you find out for me?"

Mathias craned his neck to see who was watching. "Shit, I trained one of them during my time at BND. I don't recognize the others," he said, shaking his head. "This is for you. It's all done as you asked." Mathias handed him an envelope.

"This is all of it?" Qadir asked, tapping it against his hand. "Were we right?"

"Dead on! Each account was in the name of shell companies, but we were able to trace them to the actual owners. It's all in there," he said. "While I'd like to stay and watch what happens next, I don't think it will serve my ongoing health interests."

Qadir smiled and motioned to a military police officer standing nearby. "I'll get you out of here." He gave the MP instructions on how to get his friend out of the building commenting to Mathias that he'd be in touch. He stood for a moment, watching to make sure that his friend was able to leave the building without harassment, before returning to the hall, slipping the envelope into his jacket pocket as he entered. The two BND officers

moved towards him, probably looking to question him about their former intelligence colleague, but Misbah waved them off. He moved through the crowd looking for General Ali.

Misbah spotted the General in a group of military officers. He was busy discussing the dynamics of the assault. Misbah stopped, momentarily catching the General's eye. With an almost imperceptible nod, he continued moving into the crowd of people. Different diplomats and attachés stopped him on the way, offering their felicitations on the successful military campaign. He was cordial but largely uninterested in the conversations. He was focused on searching the hall for the people he needed to find before the reception was over. He knew that those same people, interested in what had transpired outside the hall with the shadowy visitor, were watching him.

When he saw him, he had to resist the urge to walk straight up to him. The evening was winding down and many of the diplomats and their attachés had left already. The remaining were minor players in the country's national affairs, each looking for a larger stake in the game. Among them were the French, who had been trying to land defense contracts through the political governments, but had been scuttled by the military. They were also closely associated with the CIA and MI6 as a go-between for negotiations with unfriendly states.

Misbah moved slowly through the remaining diplomats, keeping the DGSE officer in sight. Luc Benoit had been stationed in Pakistan for the past year and had a number of meetings with Misbah on counter-intelligence. Their relationship was friendly and professional, regularly sharing information about groups operating in France and Europe. He knew the best way to rattle the cages of the other organizations was by sharing his information with the French.

*"Bonjour Luc. Comment allez-vous?"* Misbah said as he approached.

*"Bonjour Misbah,"* Luc replied stepping forward to shake his hand. "What a tremendous achievement. Very good."

"You know the business, Luc. Winning the small battles will win us the war."

*"Oui,* small battles are important, but you must win the war," Luc replied, nodding his head. "Paris will be expecting a detailed report from me on the operation. Our war colleges will want to teach it to our up and coming officers," he said, trying to nudge Misbah for more details than had been shared already.

Misbah smiled, sensing the opportunity to draw him into his game. "We...or rather, I could help you with that, but what would we get in return?"

"I am sure that we could find some way to assist Pakistani intelligence," Luc said, laughing.

"Actually Luc, there is something we would like to run through Paris," he said reaching into his pocket to retrieve a folded piece of paper. "We found these at the terrorist camp.

They look to be account numbers that seem to originate from French banks,” he paused as Luc read over the list of numbers. Over the years, Misbah had become a master of hiding facial expressions or vocal pitch changes that could give anything away. Luc could read nothing in the General’s face.

“These are not French banks, my friend,” Luc replied after a cursory review of the contents.

“Are you sure?” Misbah replied. “Odd, our techs said they were French,” he paused, shaking his head. “But then, who will talk to Pakistani intelligence with all the corruption cases against our politicians? I’ll take that back then,” he reached out to retrieve the page from Luc’s hands, only to have him pull it away.

“Just a moment,” Luc said, sensing frustration in Misbah’s voice, believing it to be an opportunity to leverage Pakistani intelligence for what Paris wanted. “But everyone talks to French intelligence,” he said laughing. “Let me have my people look into these numbers and see what we find. Maybe in return, you could give us a look behind the curtain. Yes?”

Misbah thought for a minute. He knew that the French would never pass the report back to him. They would leverage the information to get a better deal from the Americans and British. Everyone in the intelligence community knew the contempt that the DGSE had for the CIA and MI6 for their cowboy and private school attitudes, as well as their continued interference in internal French matters. They would make sure that both organizations knew where the information originated.

“You will need to keep our cooperation confidential. Some may not appreciate that we confided in the DGSE rather than the CIA or MI6,” Misbah said. Luc nodded his assent.

“*Oui, oui*. I’ll get back to you in a day or so,” Luc said as he slipped the paper into his pocket and went to join his diplomats who were preparing to leave.

Misbah swirled the whiskey in his hand as he watched Luc walk around the corner. Three different pieces of information to three different intelligence organizations and only one had the entire picture; this was going to be an interesting play. What would be interesting was what they would think after they checked the information.

The next few days may be more interesting than the days before the raid in Islamabad.

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It was a great feeling to sit in the barber’s chair again. After about eighteen months of deep cover, he could finally return to being Kamal Khan, a process that started with removing the beard. Kamal had always embraced the traditional values of his Pathan culture, but he had trouble with the beard that many Pathans wore to demonstrate their adherence to Islamic values.

“Captain sahib, where have you been?” Abdul asked as Kamal settled into the chair.

“UN peacekeeping, Abdul *bhai*,” Kamal replied with a smile. “A soldier’s work is never done. I need a shave and haircut.”

This request didn’t sit well with Abdul, the plump forty-year-old barber that had long been the choice of everyone at the Garrison. He had taken over the shop from his father who had originally opened it during the 1960s. The shop had seen both good and bad times, but soldiers had been the core of his business because of the close proximity to the base housing. He kept glancing in the mirror at Kamal as he collected supplies from the shelf behind him. “You look distinguished with the beard, like a good Muslim officer. Are you sure you want a shave instead of a trim?” he asked.

Kamal had dealt with this question since he was old enough to grow facial hair. Occasionally, he wouldn’t shave for a few days while on break from school. When he went to the village barbers to have it shaved, they would ask the same questions. Once during Ramadan, he had decided to grow the beard and had to travel to a neighboring village where no one knew him or his family to get a shave.

“Okay, Abdul, give me a goatee,” Kamal said, staring back in the mirror at his old friend. “Trim it down so that I can feel the skin through the beard.”

Abdul shook his head as he collected the blade and shaving cream from the shelf. The whole time he muttered in Punjabi to the other barbers, until finally Kamal interrupted.

“I may not be able to speak Punjabi fluently, but I do understand it completely,” he said with a bland expression. Abdul smiled as he disinfected the blade and straight razor with Dettol, and fifteen minutes later Kamal looked like Kamal again. Pleased with the job, he lifted his hand to his face, feeling the smooth skin for the first time in eighteen months. He pulled a hundred rupee note from his pocket and slipped it into Abdul’s hand before he stepped out the door into the cool autumn air.

Walking to his car, he took in the familiar places that he had spent time in before being posted to the ISI. He passed Haji Rauf’s *mithai* shop where he bought *jalebis* and *gulab jaman*, and the small tea hotel where he got his *parathas* on the days he was off duty. Across the street were his dry cleaner and the uniform supply depot next door. The five-minute stroll to his 1995 Suzuki Mehran reminded him of all the things he missed while deployed. *It’s good to be home*, he thought to himself as he climbed behind the wheel and started the engine. He drove, crossing more memories as he returned to base.

For most soldiers, returning to duty from a mission or special posting was a bittersweet experience. Coming back after high adrenaline situations was an emotional disappointment, much like a drug user coming off a really good high. Kamal would not be returning to active duty immediately. With at least six months left on his ISI posting, he would be spending his time at the detention facility with the suspects who had been swept up in the raids at The Sanctuary. The Director General felt that he would gain both interrogation experience and additional understanding into the red file dossiers that had

been prepared. The top command thought that Kamal may have met, trained or interacted with some of the detainees at Imam Shahid's madrassah or The Sanctuary.

Kamal dressed in the all black attire of the detention facility in his quarters at the Rawalpindi Garrison before sitting down to breakfast. As he drank his coffee, he perused the briefs that had been delivered to him, detailing the detainees that he would interact with. There were no details, only background on each of them so that he could better understand whom he would be interrogating. Kamal had requested these briefs personally to find better ways to engage and extract information. Each was a wanted man by either the police, government or security forces for their involvement in kidnapping, arms dealing or bombings throughout Pakistan's urban centers. Today, he would be spending time with some of the lower cadre to gather information to use against the ringleaders.

A car came and collected him from the base housing promptly at 7:30 a.m. The security protocol didn't allow for him to drive there himself for the first few weeks, although those could be relaxed later to allow a staff car. The driver raced through Rawalpindi, past the airport and onto the Islamabad Highway, traveling for about twenty-five minutes before coming to a stop inside a disused warehouse parking area. Kamal emerged from the back seat of the car and pulled his Wayfarers from his eyes to glance around the nearly empty lot. At the entry door to the facility sat a large burly man, reading an Urdu daily, seemingly unaware of his arrival. The driver motioned to Kamal to join him as he walked toward the man, who put his newspaper down as they neared.

"Oh Baba, you better have my thousand rupees," the man said to the driver as they approached. The driver stopped dead in his tracks and smacked his forehead with the palm of his hand. He had forgotten again about the bet he had lost on the Pakistan cricket match.

"*Yaar*, I forgot again," he said as he approached the security desk. "I'll bring it tomorrow when I bring him again," he commented motioning to Kamal.

"Good morning, Kamal," the man said, reaching out his hand to introduce himself. "Aftab."

"Hello, Aftab," Kamal replied, shaking his hand. "How do you know my name?"

Aftab swirled around and used the back of his pen to tap the clipboard that was hanging there. He pulled it down and quickly flipped the pages until he found Kamal, showing him the page with his photograph and name. There was no mention of his military rank, instead there was a list of numbers that he didn't recognize.

"What are the numbers?" Kamal inquired.

"Detainee numbers and interrogation rooms," Aftab answered. "No names for security purposes."

"Are these kept on file somewhere?"

"No, they are burned at the end of the day. The only records we maintain are locked



inside the facility, but those only stay here twenty-four hours.”

“Okay, where do I start?” Kamal asked. “Do you buzz me in?”

“Do you see a button?” Aftab asked sarcastically. “Thumb scan for entry. If it opens, down the hall, fifth door on the left. They will guide you from there.”

“Last time, I was at the seventh door,” Kamal said. “Must have changed things since.”

“Last time?” Aftab asked confused. “You’ve been here before?”

“Once, about three or four months ago for an interrogation.”

“I’m on the door; I don’t remember seeing you before.”

Kamal shrugged, indifferent to the answer. “No loss for either for us,” he said, pressing his thumb to the reader until he heard the door buzz open. He went in alone while the driver walked back to the car. He caught a glimpse of him walking away just before the security door slammed shut. He walked down the quiet corridor until he reached the fifth door. He took a deep breath before turning the knob and pulling it open...to find a room full of file clerks.

“I was told to come here,” Kamal said confused. “Am I supposed to be someplace else?”

The four clerks looked over at him from their file cabinets. One of the clerks walked over to the desk nearest Kamal and sat down. The other clerks went back to filing their stacks, while the clerk behind the desk shuffled some files looking for something. Unable to find it on his desk, he spun around in his swivel chair and pulled a binder from the shelf behind him.

“Name,” he asked pulling his glasses to his face.

“Kamal Khan.”

The clerk found the tab for K and quickly started hunting for Kamal’s information. Finding it, he looked up at Kamal, pulling his glasses down again before slipping them back on to read the insert.

“Rana,” he called across the room. “Give me 8645061.” While Rana looked for the file, he picked up the wireless walkie-talkie and repeated the number to someone on the other end. “Put him in IR5.” By the time he had finished speaking, Rana had found the file and placed it on his desk. The man picked up the file, confirmed the number and handed it to Kamal. Confused, Kamal looked at him for instruction on what he was supposed to do with the file.

“Down the hall, turn right. Go through the red door, third door on your left,” the man said with a sigh. “Why do they send you newbies to me without any instruction?” Kamal opened his mouth to answer, but the man went on wearily. “I don’t really care. There will be someone outside the room when you are done with your next file. Now go,” he said with a wave of his hand.

Kamal stepped out the door. *What a prick*, he thought, reading the file as he moved

down the hall. Shahid Aleem, alias Ahsanullah Ahsan, age 25, captured at Jamia Binoria in Karachi. He was suspected of car bombings in Peshawar and Lahore that had killed a politician and fifteen others, and he had ties to the terrorist network. The file was sparsely filled with mostly assumptions and circumstantial evidence; he had to get details on any other acts Shahid had carried out. Kamal reached IR5 and closed the file. There were two guards stationed outside. He stopped, searching his pockets for some change before asking one of the guards to get two cups of sweet tea, a packet of *naswar* and a plate of *samosas*, before opening the door and entering. He stopped inside to do a quick assessment of the man that he would spend the next few hours with. Walking across the room, he put the file on the table and sat down.

“So, what do I call you?” Kamal asked sitting down on the corner of the table.

Shahid looked like he hadn’t bathed in weeks. His face and clothing were covered with dirt. He looked younger than his age, but tried to puff himself up in front of Kamal to look older and stronger. He was diminutive in size, his torso mostly hidden behind the table where he was chained. He didn’t fit the profile of a hardened terrorist nor did his hands bear the marks of a bomb maker. He almost looked scared to be there.

“Do you have a name or should I call you Shahid?” Kamal asked again, hoping that repeating his given name would find a space within his psyche that could be leveraged later, but no answer came. “Okay, Shahid it is,” he said opening the file.

“I prefer Ahsan,” the boy said. “No one calls me Shahid anymore.”

“Ahsan? Really? Shahid is the name your parents gave you,” Kamal said. “I think I am going to stick with the name that Allah provided, rather than this one.”

“Why did you ask then?” the boy asked. “If you were just going to call me Shahid, why ask me?”

“I thought you might have some respect for your parent’s wishes,” Kamal said. “Since you don’t, I will.”

Kamal spent the next few hours playing question and answer with Shahid, finding no new information or leads. He only succeeded in angering the boy a few times.

“You know I read your file, but it doesn’t sound at all like the boy sitting in front of me,” Kamal said, giving him a pitying look. “You’re just a scared little boy.”

“I’m not a little boy,” he said jerking at the restraints. Unable to get any movement, he slammed his open hand down. “Take these off and I will show you who is the little boy!”

“Do you want to stamp your feet on the ground as well?” Kamal asked with a smile. He had always been entertained by the displays of strength from these terrorists once they were caught. Every one of these guys had a misplaced sense of machismo, probably from the mullahs and criminals that had taught them their craft. “You sure you want to dance with me, little boy? I’m not one of the little girls that you torment with your friends.”

“Take them off,” he yelled. “You people are all so tough when we’re locked up. But on

the battlefield, you cry for mercy when we put the sword to your throats,” he growled.

Kamal reached across the table and smacked Shahid hard across the face. Before he could get his senses back, he slapped him again, this time drawing blood. “If your father had done this, maybe you would be a man today instead of a coward pretending to be a man.”

“Take these off! I’ll kill you,” he screamed at Kamal. Kamal sat back and laughed.

“Come on Shahid,” Kamal leaned back casually in his chair. “You wouldn’t be able to do a *qurbani*. It’s all talk with you,” Kamal jeered, pushing him to admit to something.

“*Khaar bachiya! Spee bachiya!*” he yelled again. “I have killed five soldiers just like you. I watched the blood pour from their neck after I cut their heads off. I’ll do the same to you,” he cried, trying to reach Kamal.

“At least they are *shaheed* now,” Kamal retorted. “Allah gives them a special place in *jannat*. Do you know where you’re going? Do you have any idea how many souls will attack you during your *azab-e-qabar*? Your father says you are a coward, unable to fight like a man. Your family says that they don’t even want your body. They told us to burn it when you die,” Kamal mocked him. “That’s why you make bombs right? Too afraid to fight like a man?”

There were two things Kamal had learned about these people during his deep cover assignment. They gained respect by boasting about the deeds they had done. Those with the most spectacular kills had the most respect. They also had the mental strength of children when cornered. They were trained to fight, not withstand the mental abuse that good interrogators used. A young terrorist could be broken faster with mind games than torture and Shahid was proving that point.

“My father is a weak man,” Shahid spat back at him. “I don’t care what he says about me.”

“Weak man? You ungrateful son of a bitch,” Kamal said, patronizingly. “He works every day to earn an honest living. He doesn’t kill people. He doesn’t kidnap them. He earns his money through hard work. You call that weak?”

“He doesn’t stand up for Islam. He doesn’t fight against injustice. He fears the police,” Shahid yelled back.

Kamal smiled. “Your mother said...let me find it...” Kamal said flipping the pages in the file. “Ah yes, ‘he’s not my son anymore. I prayed for a son, but now I pray that he dies a death worse than the ones he has made others suffer. I wish he had not been born now.’”

That comment hit him harder than anything Kamal could have said. His facial expression changed from an angry boy to a hurt child. No Pathan son could accept their mother wishing they were dead. No matter how long they had spent with the terrorists, attachments to mothers were unbreakable.

“Tell me what you did, Shahid,” Kamal said. “Let me tell your mother that you made a

mistake, but when we asked, you helped us.”

Shahid sat quietly looking at Kamal and then away for a few minutes before turning back. “They will kill me if I tell you,” he said quietly, his voice full of fear.

“You tell me and I’ll make sure you go back to your parents,” Kamal coaxed him. Granted, he didn’t tell him that it would be in a box. There was a knock at the door and the guard entered with the items Kamal had requested. Kamal reached across the tray and cupped the *naswar* in his hand while picking up a cup of tea. Placing it just out of Shahid’s reach, Kamal pulled a cigarette from his pack and placed it alongside. “Tell me about the bomb you set off in Peshawar,” Kamal asked quietly.

“They haven’t fed me anything all day,” Shahid said, attention focused on the plate of *samosas*, hands shaking. “Could I have one?”

“Answer my questions and I’ll give you one,” Kamal replied. “As a reward. Each question you answer, another *samosa*,” he said reaching over the table to take one himself. Personally, he wasn’t a big fan of *samosas*, but this was all about the show, so he pulled it apart to let the steam escape. “Best when they are hot, Shahid,” he said. “I wouldn’t wait too long.”

Shahid’s mouth watered and he licked his lips, imagining the taste of the *samosa* in his mouth. His eyes glazed from the hunger of not being fed all day and sub-standard meals of previous days that had contributed to his stomach problems. Struggling with the words, Shahid stammered out, “I...got...a call.... They...told me to prepare.”

“Prepare for what?” Kamal asked, taking another bite of the *samosa*.

“They said I would be traveling to Peshawar,” Shahid said, eyes focused on the food. “I would get more instructions there.”

“Guard!” Kamal called. Shahid cringed, eyes bulging out in fear, wondering why the guard had been called. “Unhook him,” Kamal said when he entered. The guard looked at him, questioning the change in interrogation protocol. “It’s okay,” Kamal said. “We have an understanding, right Shahid?” Shahid nodded in agreement. The guard hesitantly unlocked the iron restraints around Shahid’s wrists, making a point to squeeze them tighter before releasing them. Kamal didn’t appreciate the guard’s behavior, watching Shahid wince, but wouldn’t confront him in front of the detainee. They needed to command fear among them otherwise the interrogator’s jobs would be much harder.

Shahid reached for a *samosa*, but abruptly stopped with his hand mid-air. He looked at Kamal for approval, a product of the behavioral conditioning program at the detention center. He waited for the approval to come before continuing towards the sustenance. Kamal hesitated, watching Shahid’s expressions and body language, before nodding his head. Shahid swept up a *samosa*, devouring it in seconds.

Kamal spent the next four hours building a relationship with him. He used it to confirm information in the file and extract operational details that would be used in other

interrogations. Shahid's relatively new indoctrination to the network allowed Kamal to break the minimal loyalty he had in return for personal satisfaction. Kamal knew that others would not be as easy to break, but this one had given them a great deal of information that would help when interrogating the others. At the end of the session, he collected all the papers that were spread around the table and added them to the file. A photograph fell out that caught Shahid's attention.

Shahid reached across the table and picked up the photo, staring at it like it was jogging some latent memory. Finally, he asked, "Why do you have a photo of Adnan?"

Kamal took the photo from Shahid and looked at it without expression. "How do you know Adnan?"

"He was an elder at Jamia Binoria," Shahid said. "He was the one who gave lectures on jihad at the madrassah."

"When was he there?" Kamal inquired, flipping the photo over to add the name Adnan.

"Maybe two or three years ago," Shahid said. "He had many visitors from outside the masjid."

"Outside the masjid?" Kamal asked. "Other mullahs?"

"No," Shahid replied quickly before hesitating. "No, he met the people who were not like us — troublemakers, drug dealers, and criminals mostly. We told the Imam, but he could do nothing since Adnan was a special guest."

Kamal leaned back in the chair, jotting notes on the back of the photo. "What else can you tell me about Adnan? Where is he now?"

"He didn't speak to the students privately much," Shahid said. "Most of us tried not to meet him, but he had a group of ten or fifteen that was always in his office. They were like him, 'special guests'. I don't know where he went after we flew to Peshawar."

"He flew with you?"

"Well, he was on the same plane, but sat with another man that I didn't know," Shahid said. "They didn't travel to Jinnah Airport together, but they left Peshawar that way."

Kamal jotted down the additional information and closed the file with the photo inside. Getting up, he told Shahid that he would see him again in a few days before exiting the room.

"Put him somewhere safe," Kamal told the guard. "He has lots to tell us and feed him better food."

"But sir, we have orders," the guard called to Kamal as he walked down the hall, causing him to stop and return to the door.

"You have new orders now," Kamal said, inches from the guard's face. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. I'll have him moved in the evening."

“He doesn’t leave this room until you have a secure place to put him,” Kamal growled. “He doesn’t go back into the detainee population. They will kill him before we can get more out of him,” he said turning back down the hall.

Kamal quietly slipped the photograph out of the file and into his pocket before heading back to the file clerk’s room. Arriving at the clerk’s room, he found the door locked. He knocked a few times, but no one answered. *Could they have left*, he wondered, pulling his watch from his pocket. *It’s not that late*. Kamal went to the entry door to the facility and scanned his thumb. Popping the door open, he looked for Aftab, but the guard had changed while he was inside.

“Where are the clerks?” Kamal asked the new man on the desk.

He looked up at Kamal, uninterested in the interruption of his review of the day’s newspaper. “Left almost an hour ago,” he said before returning to the newspaper.

“So what do I do with this?” Kamal asked, holding the file out to the guard.

The guard grunted, holding back the answer that had obviously filled his mind. “Detainee files go in the drop slot in the clerk’s door,” he said without looking up again.

“Can’t do that. There are loose papers that will fall out.”

The guard looked annoyed at the repeated interruptions and questions. “That doesn’t seem to be my problem, does it? Why don’t you take it with you? You can bring it back tomorrow.”

“No, I have issued new orders to the guards,” Kamal said. “I need to document them for the administration.”

The guard opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out a form, handing it to Kamal. “Fill this out, give the yellow one to the guard,” he said. “When you do that, orders are issued.”

Kamal snatched the form from the guard’s hand and quickly filled it out with the new orders. He separated the yellow sheet from the other two copies. Seeing a rubber band on the table, he wrapped it around the file before re-entering the facility. Dropping the file into the slot in the clerk’s door, he walked down the hall to IR5. Opening the door to the interrogation hall, he saw the guard guiding Shahid down the hall.

“Guard!” Kamal called. “Stop! Where are you taking him?”

The guard stopped, turning to see who was calling him. “Back to detention,” he said before continuing down the hall.

Kamal increased his pace to catch up with him. He reached him just as he opened the secure door to the holding area. He pushed the door closed, handing the new orders to the guard. “He doesn’t go back in there without my orders,” Kamal said angrily. “I told the other guard but he doesn’t seem to have told you.”

The guard read through the new orders and sighed. “These don’t go into effect until the administrator signs off, that won’t happen until tomorrow,” he said.

Kamal pulled the guard aside, leaving Shahid chained at the door. "You put him in there, he'll be dead by tomorrow," Kamal explained. "I want him somewhere safe while we confirm what he has told us."

The guard looked at Kamal, sensing the urgency in his voice. "I'll put him in the secure area for now," he said. "You have twenty-four hours to get it cleared from administration."

"Just keep him safe for now," Kamal said. "I'll speak with administration in the morning to make it permanent."

Kamal walked back to the security door and the annoying security guard. He emerged to find his driver waiting for him, sitting among the other drivers and security personnel. He motioned for him to join him at the car. "Let's go," he said when the driver arrived.

Pulling out of the facility, Kamal looked at the driver before pulling the photo out of his pocket. He kept it face down, reading the notes on the back. The driver looked back to him in the mirror wondering where he should go from the traffic light that was fast approaching.

"Sir, back to the base housing?" he asked stopping at the light.

Kamal thought for a moment as he flipped the photo over to look at the face again. He sighed and shook his head. "Do you think," he started. "Do you think anyone is at headquarters?"

"Sir, nowadays, someone is always at headquarters."

"Raise them on the wireless and let them know I need to speak with the Director General urgently," he said.

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It was just after seven in the evening when the car pulled into ISI headquarters. The drive from the detention center was fraught with indecision. *Am I doing the right thing? Should I interrogate Shahid more before I go to the DG?* If he was wrong and rushed the information, it would damage the investigation. But if he was right, they had caught something much bigger.

Even though he wasn't in uniform, he walked through the security gate without any questions. A member of the security team joined him on the other side of the gate to escort him up to the Director General's office. Unlike his previous visits, Kamal raised no objection to the escort, instead choosing to engage in conversation. The conversation was more to settle his own nerves than be friendly, but it did calm him for the discussion he was about to have.

When they arrived on the fourth floor, Kamal realized why he needed an escort. The elevator door opened to reveal four men dressed in suits with communications units in

their ears. Kamal stepped out and the four men looked him up and down to assess who he was. Kamal immediately recognized them from the American flags on their lapels. *What is the CIA doing here?* The escort waved them off, identifying him as an ISI operative. Moving down the hall, Kamal noticed more of the CIA contingent walking along the corridor. He couldn't tell if they were armed or not, but thought it would be unlikely inside an ISI facility. The escort led him into the DG's waiting room, where Kamal found a Special Forces security detail along with some other suits.

Kamal took a seat next to one of the suits, glancing over surreptitiously to assess the men. The suit sat stiff in the chair, holding a file in his manicured fingers. The lack of facial hair and the fashionable haircut screamed private school background. Kamal leaned back in his seat to get a better look at the file he cupped in his hand, but all he could see was the word 'colour' in bold print. Kamal's mind started to connect the dots. *MI6, CIA, with this much security at the ISI DG's office? There had to be station chiefs inside, no one else would get this much security. But why are they here?*

Before Kamal could consider anything else, the DG's door opened and two men rushed out looking very angry. The respective details moved with them out of the waiting room. A few minutes later, the MS emerged and asked Kamal to join him in the office.

"Good evening sir," Kamal said, snapping off a salute.

Lt. General Qadir stood behind his desk, phone to his ear. He motioned to Kamal to come in and sit down. Kamal tried not to listen to the conversation, but it was difficult with the volume that Qadir was speaking at.

"They are obviously upset," Qadir said in response. "We cleaned out their war chests.

"No, sir, I didn't admit to our role, but I think they suspect us," he said a few minutes later.

"No, sir. There is nothing that can be connected to the ISI," he said.

Kamal stood up thinking that he should give the DG some privacy, but the DG snapped his fingers and pointed at the chair. He silently mouthed 'sit down' which was enough to plant Kamal back in the chair.

"Sir, let them do what they want," Qadir said. "We have them dead to right running covert operations in our country with their money and operatives. Those operations cost innocent Pakistani lives. They don't want that made public." That statement brought Kamal out of his chair again, jamming his hand into his pocket for the photograph. Finding it, he placed it on the DG's desk. Qadir stopped mid-sentence, looking at the photo and then at Kamal. "Sir, Captain Kamal Khan has just joined me. I think he has something to tell us," he said into the phone. "I'm going to put you on speaker," he pressed a button on his phone and hung up the receiver.

"General Ali, can you hear me?" Qadir asked.

"Loud and clear," General Ali replied. "Good evening Captain."



“Good evening sir. I hope I’m not interrupting.”

“Tell us what you know,” the General said.

“Sir, I am just coming from the detention center where I spoke with a Shahid Aleem, alias Ahsanullah Ahsan. He was arrested from Jamia Binoria in Karachi,” Kamal spoke confidently. “I’ve placed a photograph in front of the DG of another detainee that he identified as Adnan. Adnan was at Binoria two to three years ago as a jihad instructor.”

“Why is this important in the current context?”

“Sir, he says that they flew to Peshawar together. Same plane, different seats,” Kamal said. “When they arrived in Peshawar, Adnan left with some Americans he had met on the flight.”

There was silence in the room as the two men considered the response. “Misbah, do we know the man in the photograph?” General Ali asked.

“It’s the Sheikh,” Qadir replied. “It’s Sheikh Atif.” Silence again filled the room. Kamal could hear a lighter click and assumed that the General had lit one of his trademark cigarettes.

“Are you saying,” the General started. “Are you seriously saying we have a CIA asset in our custody?”

Kamal and Qadir looked at each other, trying to decide who should answer the question.

“Gentlemen, I am going to assume that one of you has an answer to that question,” the General said. “I’d appreciate it if one of you shared.” Misbah nodded at Kamal to answer.

“Sir, based on what the detainee told me...” Kamal started to say, but the General interrupted him.

“That was a yes or no question, Captain,” he said impatiently. “You can explain after the simple answer.”

Kamal looked at the DG, took a deep breath and said as calmly as he could. “No sir. I think we have a CIA *operative* in our custody, not an asset.”

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## WHAT READERS HAVE SAID...

“A comparison to works by LeCarre has been made by a fellow reader and while I would hate to imply that there are obvious similarities I will say that the two authors have certainly the same admirable competence in strong plotting, vivid characterization and atmospheric style.

Pakistan and its people are often misrepresented in the Western world and I loved how the author managed to bring in a whole spectrum of characters, showing again a complex picture instead of resorting to simple stereotypes or clique; all the while also highlighting outside interests in the country and the internal struggles. While the story moves at a fast pace with compelling writing the author also raises many points about the country's current state of affairs. It shows a writer with a sharp and thoughtful mind who knows also about diplomacy and international politics - just like any good spy thriller writer should in my opinion. A good thriller with substance. Very recommendable.”

– *Christoph Fischer, author of The Three Nations Trilogy*

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“I thought that this was going to be quite a difficult read for me because on top of the plot complexity of a spy novel there would be the unfamiliar names and places because it was set in Pakistan. So I started off with my laptop beside me open to Google Maps and Wikipedia only to discover that the story was delivered in such an easily digestible way that I hardly had to refer to either. There were a lot of unfamiliar names of people and places at first but they started to sort themselves out as the plot advanced, leading in to a fascinating world of secrets, lies, subterfuge and scandal, not to mention gangs and bribery and corruption reaching right to the top of the government.”

- *Karen Prince, author of Lost Kingdoms of Karibu*

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“The story moves at an amazing pace, just like any good spy thriller writer should, and there is a bewildering succession of names and situations to grip and often confuse the reader. Gripping because Khalid Muhammad's imagination and writing has you constantly on the edge of your seat to find out what happens next. I am loathe to describe in detail much of the plot since I am of the opinion that this can prove too much of a spoiler for potential readers of the book. Our hero, Kamal Khan, turns out to be not only a skilled

engager of covert operations and gung-ho fighter, as we expect, but also a ruthless interrogator of suspects. This encourages one to ponder with suspicion the reality of events that we may regularly read about in the news media...I can happily compare this first novel to those of Frederick Forsyth (*The Afghan*, *Dogs of War*) and Jack Higgins (*The Judas Gate*), for its verve and ability to capture the imagination.

I look forward to seeing more from this exciting new writer.”

- *G.J. Griffiths, author of *Fallen Hero**